

DOES 'OUGHT' CONVERSATIONALLY IMPLICATE 'CAN'?

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Abstract:

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that 'ought' does not entail 'can', but instead conversationally implicates it. I argue that Sinnott-Armstrong is actually committed to a hybrid view about the relation between 'ought' and 'can'. I then give a tensed formulation of the view that 'ought' entails 'can' that deals with Sinnott-Armstrong's argument and that is more unified than Sinnott-Armstrong's view.

DOES ‘OUGHT’ CONVERSATIONALLY IMPLICATE ‘CAN’?

Suppose that Jones’ home has been burgled, and that the burglar has tied Jones to a chair. After several hours, Smith arrives. Because Jones does not answer the door, Smith looks through the window. He sees Jones sitting on a chair, but does not notice that Jones is tied to it. When Jones sees Smith and shouts to him that he has been burgled, Smith replies:

‘If you’ve been burgled, what are you doing in that chair? You ought to call the police!’

It then seems natural for Jones to respond:

‘Look, I’m tied to this chair, so I cannot call the police!’

We may think that Smith will then have withdraw his claim that Jones ought to call the police. That is so, we may think, because

‘Ought’ entails ‘can’: if it is true that a person ought to do something, it must be true that this person can do this thing.

According to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, however, ‘ought’ does not entail ‘can’.¹ Instead, Sinnott-Armstrong claims,

¹ See Sinnott-Armstrong 1984 and Sinnott-Armstrong 1988. Page numbers in the text refer to Sinnott-Armstrong 1984. Sinnott-Armstrong’s view is endorsed by Pigden 1990 and Saka 2000. A similar view is defended by Forrester 1989.

'Ought' conversationally implicates 'can': in certain kinds of conversation, if a speaker claims that a person ought to do something, a listener will normally suppose that the speaker thinks that this person can do this thing.²

The difference between these two views is this. If 'ought' entails 'can', Smith's claim that Jones ought to call the police is false. But if 'ought' conversationally implicates 'can', Smith's claim that Jones ought to call the police could be true, even though Jones will normally suppose that Smith thinks that Jones can call the police. Moreover, if 'ought' conversationally implicates 'can', Smith can cancel the implicature of his claim by denying that he thinks that Jones can call the police.³ Jones could then object that Smith's claim that Jones ought to call the police was misleading, but not that it is false.

I shall argue, however, that Sinnott-Armstrong is wrong. 'Ought' does entail 'can', I shall argue, but we need to formulate this view in a tensed way to see that it does.

1. Sinnott-Armstrong's example

Sinnott-Armstrong argues that 'ought' does not entail 'can' by discussing an example. He writes:

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 (252).

² For the idea of conversational implicature, see Grice 1961: 126-32, and Grice 1989. Grice's idea is more specific than this, but I shall ignore this here, since it does not affect my argument.

³ According to Grice 1989, the fact that a speaker can cancel a conversational implicature by denying what is implicated is what distinguishes conversational implicature from entailments and from other kinds of implicature, such as conventional implicatures.

If 'ought' entailed 'can', Sinnott-Armstrong claims, it would not be true at 6:00 that Adams ought to meet Brown. And that, he claims, is counterintuitive. He writes:

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 that Adams cannot be there. Brown's statement seems true, because Adams did promise, the appointment was never mutually cancelled, and the obligation was 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' (252).

Therefore, Sinnott-Armstrong claims, 'ought' does not entail 'can'.

2. Sinnott-Armstrong's hybrid view

Return to the example of Jones, who has been tied to a chair by a burglar. As we have seen, when Smith says:

'If you've been burgled, what are you doing in that chair? You ought to call the police!'

it seems natural for Jones to reply:

'Look, I'm tied to this chair, so I cannot call the police!'

What makes it seem natural for Jones to give this reply might be the truth of the view that 'ought' conversationally implicates 'can'. In that case, we must be taking Jones to suppose that Smith thinks that Jones can call the police. But now suppose that Smith responds:

‘I know you cannot call the police, but that does not make it any less true that you *ought* to call the police!’

It then seems natural for Jones to reply:

‘Don’t be ridiculous! It cannot be true that I ought to call the police if I cannot call the police!’⁴

What makes it seem natural for Jones to give this reply cannot be the truth of the view that ‘ought’ conversationally implicates ‘can’. For if ‘ought’ conversationally implicated ‘can’, Smith would be cancelling the implicature when he says that he knows that Jones cannot call the police, and it would then not be natural for Jones to reply that Smith’s claim cannot be true.

To see this, we can compare the example of Jones and Smith to Grice’s famous example of a teacher who writes a reference for a student in which the only thing the teacher says is that the student has beautiful handwriting, which conversationally implicates that the student is hopeless.⁵ Suppose that the teacher cancels this implicature by telling a colleague who reads the reference that, besides having beautiful handwriting, the student is also very intelligent. Surely, it would then *not* be natural for this colleague to reply:

⁴ If we do not think that it is natural for Jones to give this reply, that may be because we take Smith to be using ‘ought’ in the sense of ‘ought to be’, so that his claim that Jones ought to call the police even though he cannot do so merely means that it would be *good* if Jones called the police even though he cannot do so. As I shall argue at the start of section 3, however, the sense of ‘ought’ in which it may entail ‘can’, and with which both Sinnott-Armstrong and I are concerned, is not ‘ought to be’ but ‘ought to ensure’. If Smith is using ‘ought’ in the sense of ‘ought to ensure’, Smith’s claim that Jones ought to call the police even though he cannot do so means that Jones ought to *bring it about* that he calls the police even though he cannot do so. It is hard to deny that, to *this* claim, it would be natural for Jones to reply that it cannot be true.

⁵ See Grice 1961: 129.

‘It cannot be true that this student is very intelligent if he has beautiful handwriting!’

Instead, what it would be natural for the colleague to reply is that the reference is very misleading. According to Grice, this shows that the teacher has conversationally implicated, rather than implied, that the student is hopeless. In the case of Jones and Smith, it is the other way around: the fact that it *does* seem natural for Jones to reply that Smith’s claim cannot be true shows that we are *not* dealing with a conversational implicature. So what makes it seem natural for Jones to give this reply must be something else.

Sinnott-Armstrong recognizes this. He writes:

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 argument leaves 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 (254).

Contrary to what Sinnott-Armstrong suggests, however, he cannot merely leave open the possibility that ‘cannot’ sometimes excludes ‘ought’ because of a substantive moral truth. Instead, he has to claim that ‘cannot’ sometimes *does* exclude ‘ought’ because of a substantive moral truth, since otherwise he cannot accommodate the fact that it seems natural for Jones to give his second reply to Smith.⁶

Sinnott-Armstrong is therefore committed to a hybrid view about the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’, which combines two very different kinds of claim: a claim about conversational implicature, and a claim about substantive moral truths. A complete statement of this view is:

⁶ Of course, he could also claim that ‘cannot’ sometimes excludes ‘ought’ for some other reason. But since this other reason cannot always be a conversational implicature, this makes no difference to my argument.

'Ought' sometimes conversationally implicates 'can': in certain kinds of conversation, if a speaker claims that a person ought to do something, a listener will normally suppose that the speaker thinks that this person can do this thing.

'Cannot' sometimes excludes 'ought' because of a substantive moral truth: sometimes, because of a substantive moral truth, it is not true that a person ought to do something if this person cannot do this thing.

Of course, this does not mean that Sinnott-Armstrong's view is false. But it does mean that, if we can give an account of the relation between 'ought' and 'can' that is more unified than Sinnott-Armstrong's view, we have a reason to prefer this more unified account over Sinnott-Armstrong's view.⁷

3. A tensed formulation of the view that 'ought' entails 'can'

We can give such an account, I think, by reformulating the view that 'ought' entails 'can' in a way that deals with Sinnott-Armstrong's example.

We could try to deal with this example by appealing to the distinction between 'ought' in the sense of 'ought to ensure' and 'ought' in the sense of 'ought to be'. If 'ought' is used in the sense of 'ought to ensure', it expresses that a person has to *bring about* a state of affairs. If 'ought' is used in the sense of 'ought to be', by contrast, it merely expresses that it would be *good* if a state of affairs obtained.⁸ What we mean when we say that 'ought' entails 'can', we could claim, is only that 'ought' in the sense of 'ought to ensure' entails 'can'.

⁷ It could be objected that we should not expect there to be a unified account of the relation between 'ought' and 'can', since there are different kinds of 'ought'. However, I shall argue that both in Sinnott-Armstrong's example and in my example, 'ought' is used in only one sense: that of 'ought to ensure'. Therefore, in the absence of a special reason not to do so, I think we should prefer a unified view about the relation between this sense of 'ought' and 'can' over a hybrid view like Sinnott-Armstrong's.

⁸ For a discussion of this distinction, see, for example, Humberstone 1971.

Sinnott-Armstrong writes that, if Adams phones Brown at 6:00, it would be natural for Brown to say:

‘Where are you? You ought to be here (by now).’

And Sinnott-Armstrong writes that, if Adams calls at 5:00 and tells Brown that he is at the theatre, Brown could 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.’

In both of these cases, we could claim, Brown is using ‘ought’ in the sense of ‘ought to be’. And we could then claim that, since what we mean when we say that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’ is only that ‘ought’ in the sense of ‘ought to ensure’ entails ‘can’, Sinnott-Armstrong’s example fails to show that ‘ought’ does not entail ‘can’.

Unfortunately, this way of dealing with Sinnott-Armstrong’s example does not work. If Brown were using ‘ought’ in the sense of ‘ought to be’, he would merely be saying that it would be a good state of affairs if Adams were here, and that it would be a good state of affairs if Adams meets him in an hour. But Brown is clearly saying more than that. He is also saying that Adams should have *ensured* that he was here and that he met Brown in an hour, and that Adams is at fault for not having done so. Therefore, if we claim that Brown is using ‘ought’ in the sense of ‘ought to be’, we do not capture the full meaning of what Brown is saying to Adams.

If it is true that Brown is using ‘ought’ in the sense of ‘ought to ensure’, however, we can deal with Sinnott-Armstrong’s example in a different way. We can reformulate the claims that Brown makes in the example, replacing ‘ought’ with ‘ought to ensure’. If we do this, Brown’s claims become:

‘Where are you? You ought to ensure that you are here (by now).’

‘Why haven’t you left yet? You ought to ensure that you meet me in an hour, and it

takes more than an hour to get here from the theater.’

However, if Brown *knows* that Adams can no longer get there in time, it would surely be more natural for him to say:

‘Where are you? You ought to have ensured that you were here (by now).’

And if Brown *knows* that Adams can no longer meet him in an hour, it would surely be more natural for him to say:

‘Why haven’t you left yet? You ought to have ensured that you met me in an hour, and it takes more than an hour to get here from the theater.’

Brown’s claim that Adams ought to have ensured that he was here by now is the past tense of the claim that Adams ought to ensure that he is here by now, and Brown’s claim that Adams ought to have ensured that he met Brown in an hour is the past tense of the claim that Adams ought to ensure that he meets Brown in an hour. This may be obscured by the fact that the word ‘ought’ does not have a straightforward past tense.⁹ But we can make it explicit by replacing the word ‘ought’ with the phrase ‘having an obligation’.¹⁰ If we do this, Brown’s claims become:

‘Where are you? You had an obligation to be here (by now).’

‘Why haven’t you left yet? You had an obligation to meet me in an hour, and it takes more than an hour to get here from the theater.’¹¹

⁹ ‘Ought’ is itself the past tense of ‘owe’, but it is not used in that sense here.

¹⁰ ‘Having an obligation’ is normally used in a sense that is narrower than that of ‘ought to ensure’, but I here mean to use it here in a sense that is exactly as broad as that of ‘ought to ensure’.

¹¹ Sinnott-Armstrong 1985 claims that ‘I ought to have done X’ must mean either ‘I now ought to

Similarly, because the word ‘can’ does not have a straightforward future tense, we can replace it with the phrase ‘being able to’. And we can then reformulate the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’ in a tensed way. If we do this, this view becomes:

‘Had an obligation’ entails ‘was able to’: if it is true that a person *had an obligation* to do something, it must be true that this person *was able* to do this thing at the time when he had the obligation.

‘Has an obligation’ entails ‘is able to’: if it is true that a person *has an obligation* to do something, it must be true that this person *is able* to do this thing.¹²

‘Will have an obligation’ entails ‘will be able to’: if it is true that a person *will have an obligation* to do something, it must be true that this person *will be able* to do this thing at the time when he will have the obligation.¹³

Sinnott-Armstrong’s example does not refute this tensed formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’.¹⁴ And this formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’ is more unified than

have done X in the past’, or ‘It was true in the past that I ought to do X’. However, I do not think that we have to choose between these two interpretations. This becomes clear if we replace ‘I ought to’ with ‘I have an obligation’. ‘I had an obligation to do X’ always means both ‘It is true now that I had an obligation to do X’ and ‘It was true that I have an obligation to do X’.

¹² This clause would apply either if a person is able to do this thing at once, or if there is a sequence of acts open to this person such that, later, he is able to do this thing at once. For example, at 2.00, Adams is able to meet Brown, because he can walk to his car, open the door, drive off, and so on, so that, later, he meets Brown.

¹³ This clause would apply if there is now no sequence of acts open to a person such that, later, he is able to do this thing at once, but if there will later be such a sequence of acts open to him, without it being the case that this person himself can bring it about that this sequence of acts is open to him. For example, if Adams is locked up in a room but will be freed by someone else later on, he is now unable to meet Brown, but he will later be able to meet Brown – namely, when the door is opened.

¹⁴ A similar tensed reply to Sinnott-Armstrong is given by Zimmerman 1996.

Sinnott-Armstrong's hybrid account of the relation between 'ought' and 'can'. For, as we have seen, Sinnott-Armstrong's account posits two very different kinds of relation between 'ought' and 'can': a relation of conversational implicature, and a relation in virtue of substantive moral truths. But this formulation of the view that 'ought' entails 'can' posits only one kind of relation between 'ought' and 'can': a relation of entailment.¹⁵

4. Objections to the tensed formulation of the view that 'ought' entails 'can'

However, Sinnott-Armstrong considers a version of this tensed formulation of the view that 'ought' entails 'can', and rejects it. He writes:

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. It would then 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 (252-3).¹⁶

Can Sinnott-Armstrong reject this formulation of the view that 'ought' entails 'can' so easily? I think he cannot.

Surely, he cannot deny that, at 6:00, it ceases to be true that Adams ought to meet Brown, and it starts being true that Adams ought to have met Brown. But if that can happen at 6:00, then why could it not happen at 4:55, when it also ceases to be true that Adams can meet

¹⁵ Of course, the tensed formulation of the view that 'ought' entails 'can' consists of three clauses, whereas Sinnott-Armstrong's account of the relation between 'ought' and 'can' consists of two clauses. But that is merely a matter of formulation, since the tensed formulation could be reformulated as: 'If it is true that at time t a person has an obligation to do something, it must be true that at time t this person is able to do this thing.' It would then consist of only one clause.

¹⁶ The opponents that Sinnott-Armstrong refers to are Goldman 1976 and Thomason 1981.

Brown, and starts being true that Adams could have met Brown?

We may want to deny that this could happen at 4:55 because we do not want to say that Adams can escape having an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00 merely by making himself unable to meet Brown at 6:00.¹⁷ That is so, presumably, because we want to be able to blame Adams for failing to meet Brown at 6:00. And we may think that, if Adams no longer has an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00, we cannot blame Adams for failing to meet Brown at 6:00.

However, though it is no longer true after 4:55 that Adams can meet Brown at 6:00, it is still true after 4:55 that Adams *could have met* Brown at 6:00. On the tensed formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’, therefore, though it is no longer true after 4:55 that Adams has an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00, it is still true after 4:55 that Adams *had* an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00. So if we formulate the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’ in a tensed way, we can still blame Adams for not *having met* Brown at 6:00. And that seems exactly right.

Sinnott-Armstrong also writes:

[S]uppose that 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 (253).

Sinnott-Armstrong is right that, on the tensed formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’, if Adams never was, is, or will be able to meet Brown, it is never the case that Adams ought to meet Brown. But that is not an objection to this formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’. Like all of us, Adams has an obligation not to make promises that he believes he cannot fulfil.¹⁸ In this example, when Adams promises Brown to meet him at 6:00, he violates

¹⁷ As Sinnott-Armstrong suggests on page 252.

¹⁸ More exactly, he has an obligation not to make promises that, at the time of making the promise, he believes he cannot fulfil. Note that this principle does not entail the very different principle that whenever Adams believes he can fulfil a promise he is allowed to make it. That different principle

this obligation. And it is the violation of *this* obligation, rather than the violation of an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00, that Adams owes Brown an excuse for.

After all, suppose that Brown discovers at 4:00 that Adams knew all along that his car will be unavailable. If Brown could only blame Adams for violating his obligation to meet him at 6:00, Brown would have to wait until 6:00 before calling Adams to complain. But, of course, Brown does not have to do that. As soon as he finds out that Adams' car is unavailable, he can call Adams and expect an apology.

Sinnott-Armstrong could object that, in addition to the obligation not to make promises that he believes he cannot fulfil, Adams also has an obligation to keep his promises, whether he can keep them or not. And he could claim that the fact that Adams violates the first obligation by promising to meet Brown at 6:00 does not show that Adams does not also violate the second obligation by failing to turn up at 6:00. However, if that were true, Brown could first call Adams at 4:00 to demand an apology for Adams' violation of the first obligation, and could then call Adams again at 6:00 to demand an apology for Adams' violation of the second obligation. But, of course, Brown cannot do that. He cannot reasonably expect more than one apology from Adams.

Sinnott-Armstrong could also give an example in which Adams does not violate the obligation not to make promises that he believes he cannot fulfil. He could, for instance, give an example like this:

At noon, Adams promises Brown to meet him at 6:00. Adams can only get to the meeting point by car. To get to the meeting point at 6:00, he will have to leave home at 5:30. Adams will be unable to leave before 5:30, because his wife will be using the car until then. Before his wife can return home with the car, however, the car is stolen, which makes it impossible for Adams to meet Brown at 6:00.

In this example, Adams never was, is or will be able to meet Brown at 6:00, without its being

may well be false, since Adams may falsely believe that he can fulfil a promise and may be epistemically blameworthy for having this false belief.

the case that Adams violates the obligation not to make promises that he believes he cannot fulfil. Therefore, on the tensed formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’, Brown cannot blame Adams in this example.¹⁹ Again, however, that is not an objection to this formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’. In this example, Adams simply does not do anything wrong. It is therefore entirely appropriate to claim that, in this example, Brown cannot blame Adams.

5. Conclusion

I conclude that Sinnott-Armstrong has not shown that ‘ought’ does not entail ‘can’. We can give a tensed formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’ that deals with his example, and that is more unified than Sinnott-Armstrong’s hybrid account of the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’. Therefore, it is this tensed formulation of the view that ‘ought’ entails ‘can’ that I believe we should accept.²⁰

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¹⁹ I am assuming, of course, that Adams does not violate any other obligation in this example.

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