

OUGHT-IMPLIES-CAN: ERASMUS, LUTHER AND R.M. HARE

by
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1. Hare's Antinomy

A cardinal principle of prescriptivism is that no indicative can be validly derived from a set of imperatives. More correctly: 'No indicative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premises which cannot be drawn from the indicatives among them alone'.¹ (Hare (1952) p. 28.) This is rule 1) of R.M. Hare's logic of imperatives; rule 2) being Hare's variant of Hume's Law - No-Imperative-from-a-set-of-Indicatives. Yet here we confront an antinomy in Hare's thought. For he also believes in Ought-Implies-Can. And since Oughts approximate imperatives whilst Cans are indicatives, this appears to contradict the No-Ind-from-Imp principle. What's more, Hare *bases* Ought-Implies-Can on the prescriptive or imperative nature of Ought. (It is not the descriptive component of Ought-Judgements that justifies the Can.)²

The argument is roughly this. Moral judgements are akin to orders, and orders and Oughts are both answers to practical questions; 'What shall I do?' and 'What ought I to do?' respectively. Where the agent *cannot* do the thing in question (or even when she is bound to do it) the practical question 'does not arise'. An Ought or an order would be out of place. To put it another way, if I tell you to do something when you obviously can't, this is rather pointless. Hence both 'Do X!', and 'You Ought to do X', imply that you can. (Hare (1963) ch. 4.)

Note that this is an *implication*. Perhaps this offers a way out of the apparent contradiction. We can distinguish between two theses: a) that imperatives cannot *entail* indicatives, and b) that imperatives cannot *imply* indicatives. The first could be true and the second false. And it is indeed the case that Hare considers the relation between Oughts and Cans (and between orders and Cans) to be weaker than that of entailment. So what is this notion of implication? It is analogous to the relation that Strawson³ discerns

between the 'King of France is wise' and 'The King of France exists'. (Hare (1963) pp 52-4.) If it is true that the King of France is wise, he exists. But if it is *false* that he exists, it is not false that he is wise. Rather, the supposition lacks truth value: 'the question does not arise'.

But we have a problem applying this to Oughts and orders. For neither of these can be true or false *anyway*, at least as regards their prescriptive part. And it is the prescriptive part of Ought that is supposed to generate the implication. So I suggest we concoct a concept of *validity* for *commands* (both Oughts and orders), meaning what an informed and consistent prescriber would stand by. (These are the *only* constraints I wish to impose on the prescriber. She may, for instance, be a moral monster.) Using this notion we shall see if we can construct a relation, analogous to Strawsonian implication, holding between commands and Cans. At first sight, it looks as if this can be done. *If Hare's argument is right*, 'You ought to do X', implies 'You can do X', since if the first is valid (something an informed and consistent prescriber would stand by), the second is true (otherwise she wouldn't stand by the Ought). And if you *can't* do X, the question of whether you ought does not arise. So far, so good. But when we ask whether the Ought would be *invalid* or neither valid nor invalid, the analogy breaks down. *If Hare's argument is correct*, this is not an Ought a rational prescriber would stand by. So far as she is concerned if you *can't* do X, it will *not* be the case that you ought to do it. The Ought is thus *invalid*, which makes the relation much closer to entailment. My suspicion is that Hare failed to see this because he thought the negation of 'You ought to do X', was 'You ought *not* to do X', rather than it is not the case that you ought.⁴ But he is not very sensitive to the ordering of operators.

We can reinforce this point in terms of Hare's own philosophy of logic. Hare's metalogic (like Hume's moral theory) relies on sentiment; not a sentiment of approbation, but of logical incomprehension.⁵ We are confronted with a collection of offbeat utterances, and logical incomprehension ensues. This sentiment is a very useful one. It allows Hare, for instance, to define entailment relations between commands without an imperative analogue to truth-conditions. We need not look to compliance conditions to

define consequence - logical incomprehension does all. We can define what it is for command *A* to entail command *B*, thus: if someone issued command *A* but refused to endorse *B*, she would induce logical incomprehension in innocent bystanders.

How do we describe the relation between Oughts and Cans (or orders and Cans) in terms of this sentiment? *Given Hare's argument*, if someone prescribed that 'You ought to do X', but refused to accept that you could, she would excite logical incomprehension. Further, if someone asserted that you could *not* do X, but insisted that you ought (that is, refused to rescind the prescription) logical incomprehension would again ensue. So far, this could still be implication. But I suggest that on Hare's showing, if someone asserted that you could not do X, and refused to accept that it is *not* the case that you ought, this too would induce logical incomprehension. Which converts the relation into an entailment. Thus Hare can't dodge the difficulty by appealing to a distinction between entailment and implication.

Even if this was a workable solution, it is not one that Hare should adopt. For rule 1) that imperatives do not entail indicatives is the converse of rule 2) that indicatives do not entail imperatives. Both are justified by the same arguments. (Hare thinks that in logic you don't get out what you haven't put in. Deduction introduces nothing new.) So if Hare tried to wriggle out of the antinomy by claiming that although imperatives do not *entail* indicatives, they can *imply* them, it is open to an opponent to make the same move with respect to rule 2). Although indicatives do not *entail* imperatives they can, nevertheless, *imply* them. And this would reduce 'Hume's Law' to rational impotence. Hare's anti-naturalist polemic would collapse.

So the contradiction between Ought-Implies-Can and rule1) No-Indicatives-from-Imperatives remains. Which of them has to go?

Well, the news is that Martin Luther solved the problem in the 16th century. But

to understand the solution we must do a certain amount of scene-setting.

2. What God Necessarily Knows

Cast your mind back to the Middle Ages. The scholastics were bothered by the problem of future contingent singulars. Suppose God foreknows some sinful act of mine (I'll let your imaginations run riot on this one.). This surely renders my sin necessary. Divine foreknowledge not only takes away the contingency of future contingent singulars but removes moral responsibility as well. For if my sin is bound to happen, I cannot help myself but sin. In which case, Divine punishment seems out of place.

Aquinas replied with a distinction between the necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the consequent. Necessarily if God foresees that I am sinning, then I am sinning (necessity of the consequence) But it does not follow that I am sinning *necessarily* (necessity of the consequent). I can (at least logically) do otherwise than sin at that time, and consequently have no gripe against Divine Justice. (See *Summa Contra Gentiles* vol. 1, ch. 67.)

Luther did not care for the scholastics who he rudely referred to as sophists (godless ones when they exaggerated the obscurity of Scripture). Nor did he care for their distinction. It was valid, no doubt, but frivolous. For 'God foreknows all things not contingently but necessarily and immutably'. (Luther (1522)(1957)*On the Bondage of the Will*.) 'This bombshell', Luther boasts, 'knocks 'Free-Will flat'. Indeed it does. For it follows 'by resistless logic' that 'all we do, however it may appear to us to be done contingently is in reality done necessarily'. The resistless logic in question is a modal principle (often known as K) common to modal logics from T on up:

$$\Box(p \supset q) \supset (\Box p \supset \Box q).$$

Taking q to describe some future act, and replacing p with Gkq (God knows that q), we

get:

$$\Box(Gkq \supset q) \supset (\Box Gkq \supset \Box q).$$

The antecedent is agreed on all hands to be true (it is the consequence whose necessity 'the sophists' admit). Thus the consequent is true likewise. Now the antecedent of *this*: *Necessarily God knows that q*, is the bombshell that flattens free will. For if *this* is true, q is necessary. And the same goes for every q describing a supposedly contingent act. All are necessitated by the necessity of Divine foreknowledge. Free will is exploded since we lack even the logical possibility of doing other than we do.

'Hang on a moment' you may say. 'Surely you - and Luther - are reading "God foreknows all things, not contingently but necessarily" as "God foreknows *each* thing necessarily". That is, for any truth about the future q, God knows it necessarily:

$$(q) (Tq \supset \Box Gkq).$$

This certainly gives Luther what he wants since from q it follows that necessarily God knows that q, and the hypothesis of Divine foreknowledge presupposes an infinity of such truths q. However this is not how the necessity of Divine foreknowledge should be read. "God foreknows all things necessarily" - better "Necessarily God foreknows all things" - should be understood as saying that necessarily *if* something is true, *then* God knows it:

$$\Box(q) (Tq \supset Gkq).$$

And this can be true without abolishing the category of the contingent. Indeed, we have a quantified version of the necessity of the consequence/necessity of the consequent distinction. *Necessarily if something is true God foreknows it*, (necessity of the consequence) is compatible with the contingency of future contingent singulars and does

not imply *if something is true then necessarily God foreknows it* (necessity of the consequent). Hence Luther's bombshell is not as flattening as he supposed. Free Will can survive not only Divine Foreknowledge but the *necessity* of Divine Foreknowledge.

For the purposes of this paper, I am not obliged to defend Luther's doctrine. Rather, I ask the reader to understand it, in order to see why Luther is compelled to reject Ought-Implies-Can. It is Luther's arguments against Ought-Implies-Can (as a logical principle) that I find convincing *not* his Divine Determinism. However, there is something to be said for his views on Foreknowledge and Free Will too. For remember, Luther's 'bombshell' is not merely that 'God foreknows all things necessarily' but that 'God foreknows all things not contingently but necessarily *and immutably*' (my italics). Now, if we grant the conventional reading of the necessity of Divine Foreknowledge – $\Box(q) (Tq \supset Gkq)$ - then God will remain temporally *unchanged*. That is to say, he will not mutate over time (except, perhaps, with regard to His temporally indexed beliefs and his temporally relational properties.) He will, however, be *changeable* or *mutable*. For in other possible worlds where people do otherwise, He will have other beliefs about what they do. A God who believes one thing here and another thing there, a now-this now-that God whose mental states and hence whose *Mind* varies from world to world - such a God is plainly lacking in that immovable splendour with which Luther is apt to invest the Deity. No, so far as Luther is concerned, if God knows something it *stays known* - and not just in this world but in the other possible worlds as well. So Luther's reading of the necessity of Divine Foreknowledge is not simply a piece of question-begging perversity, but springs from his desire to magnify the power and all-round magnificence of God at the expense of His moral attributes. We may object - indeed I *do* object - to Luther's conception of God. But once this is granted it becomes quite plausible that God should know each future truth necessarily. Whence by 'resistless logic' contingency and Free Will are both abolished.

On this Luther founds his rebarbative doctrine of salvation *sola fide*. What God

wills cannot be distinguished from what He foresees. Nothing happens he does not purpose. Further His will is necessary and immutable. So man cannot turn to God unless that is what God wants him to do. There can be no question of a little unaided effort, that is subsequently rewarded by grace. Salvation is a free and unmerited gift which God grants to some but withholds from others. The very desire to seek salvation is something God instills. It is not so much that we are saved through faith (I say 'we' though I doubt whether Luther would admit me to the elect) - rather *that* we have faith is a sign that we are saved.

What of the law and the commandments? These are impossible to unaided men. Indeed, complete obedience is impossible even to those assisted by Grace. There is no salvation by works. You cannot, for instance, 'love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy strength and all thy might.' It simply isn't on (p. 164-165). But though you *cannot* obey, you certainly *ought* to do so. Which is why you are righteously damned if you are not among the elect, and why election is an act of mercy rather than strict justice. Hence Ought does not imply Can.

3. Erasmus and Ordinary Language Philosophy

Erasmus objected to this. In a mild and confused treatise (misleadingly called a *Diatribes*)⁶ he tries to steer a way through the Scylla of Luther's Divine determinism and the Charybdis of Pelagianism. He doesn't do a very good job, partly because the channel he has to navigate is very narrow, and partly because he was not really interested in the topic, seeing it as irrelevant to Christian living.

He did have some good points however. Erasmus notes a number of passages in Scripture of the following kinds (All page references to quotations in Luther (1957).)

- 1) God offers some good (usually salvation) on condition that the audience reforms and obeys his commandments.

2) God simply issues commandments to some group.

In both cases, some members of the group fail to measure up, something God must have foreseen.

Example (1) *Ecclesiasticus* 15.14.17. God is made to address man thus: 'If thou art willing to keep the commandments.... they shall preserve thee'. Not all men have kept the commandments, from which it follows on Luther's principles that they could not have done so. (p. 143.) Indeed, *nobody* can fulfill the law if 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God' is taken as binding. (p. 165.)

Example (2). Though commands are abundant in the Bible, Erasmus pitches upon the following, *Deuteronomy* 30.19.: 'I have set before thy face life and death; choose what is good.' Yet many, if not most of us, have, in effect, chosen death, a choice which, if Luther is right, we could not but make. (p. 157.)

Erasmus gets to work on these with ordinary language philosophy; drawing conclusions because 'the nature of words and the use of language among men seem to require it' (as Luther contemptuously complains (p. 152)). As regards (1) he argues that for God to offer someone something on condition of compliance would be mere mockery unless compliance were possible. It would be 'ridiculous' (or 'logically odd' in Hare's phrase) to say to a blind man 'If thou art willing to see, thou wilt find a treasure'. 'Tidy your room up and I'll give you your pocket money' implies that the child can do so. It would be inappropriate, indeed bizarre, if the child were tied up.

Similarly for (2), it would be logically odd to command people to choose the good if they could not comply and 'ridiculous to say to a man standing where two roads met: "You see two roads; go by which you will" when only one of them was open'. Accordingly, compliance with the commandments is possible and the will is free. (p.

158.) Thus Erasmus presents one side of Hare's antinomy. Ought implies Can and orders imply Can since both would be pointless - even ridiculous - if obedience were impossible. (Incidentally, Erasmus proves the error of those like Nussbaum (1986) who seem to think that Ought-Implies-Can is a distinctively *Kantian* principle. It goes back at least to Pelagius).

4. Luther, Prescriptivism and Ordinary Language

Luther replies that Erasmus' arguments prove too much. 'If they prove anything at all they prove [the] plenary free will' of the Pelagians, the power without grace to comply with God's commands. (p. 185 and pp 154-5.)⁷ For if the command is to keep the commandments, and commands imply Can, then men have the plenary ability to obey. I think this is a mistake; there is a semi-Pelagian alternative, a way between Luther's, Scylla and Pelagius' Charybdis. But it will not detain us now. (See § 8.)

For Luther accepts what sounds like *prescriptivism*, apparently common currency in 16th century Germany. 'Even grammarians and schoolboys at street-corners know that nothing more is signified by verbs in the imperative mood than what ought to be done.' If *vice is versa* and Oughts express imperatives (as seems to be implied) this *is* prescriptivism (or as near as makes no difference) - a doctrine well-known to German schoolboys! Luther goes on to insist on Hare's rule 1), No-Indicatives-from-Imperatives. 'What is done or what can be done should be expressed by verbs in the indicative. How is it that you theologians are twice as stupid as schoolboys in that as soon as you get hold of a single imperative verb you infer an indicative meaning [as with Ought-Implies-Can]?' (p. 159). This is half of Hare's antinomy.

But what of ordinary language and the counterarguments of Erasmus and Hare? According to Luther, 'the nature of words and the use of language even among men' are on his side rather than Erasmus'. He cites a number of cases where it is intelligible,

appropriate, and not logically odd to command what can't be done.

a) Parents may 'play with their children, bidding them to come to them or do this or that, only in order that it may appear how impotent they are, and that they may be compelled to call for help.' This seems to me a rather cruel child-rearing tactic, but the order makes sense despite the children's incapacity. (p. 152).

b) A 'faithful physician' may 'tell an obstinate patient to dothings that are impossible.... so as to bring him by experience of himself to a knowledge of his disease or weakness'. (p. 152). Again one may have doubts about the physician's technique and moral character - surely there are less ruthless methods of bringing the patient's weakness to his attention - but there is nothing absurd or linguistically quaint about it.

c) Erasmus, citing the *Deuteronomy* passage and several others, remarks the 'all these words would be inappropriately spoken were man's will not free for good'. (p. 159.) It would be like ordering a man whose right arm was bound, to stretch it forth for some excellent wine. (p. 160). Luther retorts that this would be perfectly reasonable and linguistically sound if the man were a vain and foolish fellow who denied his captivity and insisted he was free. (p. 161.)

d) Finally Luther demands whether anything is more common than 'the use of insulting and provoking language when we would show our friends and enemies what they can and cannot do.' (p. 152). Given the nasty conversational habits of Luther's associates it is not surprising that he considered them worthy of damnation. But nasty as they may have been, they were not logically at fault.

Luther, it seems, has resolved Hare's antinomy. There is indeed a contradiction between the No-Indicatives-From-Imperatives principle and the idea that Oughts and orders imply Can. But the second of these conjuncts is false. There is no linguistic or logical bar to impossible Oughts and orders. They may not be nice; they may even be immoral. But they are not pointless or absurd. In particular they may publish the powerlessness of the addressee and bring his incapacity forcibly to his notice.

5. *Sincere Oughts and the Truly Faithful Physician*

But surely there is something very odd about Luther's commands. They are atypical, indeed so atypical as to qualify as commands only by courtesy. With a regular command, the commander wants to see the command obeyed. Not so with Luther's examples. The parents out to demonstrate the impotence of their offspring, the physician out to demonstrate the weakness of his patient, the associates of Luther mocking at their enemies or at Erasmus' bound man, nay, God Himself when he issues the Ten Commandments - *none* of them want to see their commands carried out. If the impossible became possible and obedience ensued, none of them would be pleased, nor would they feel that their purposes had been accomplished.⁸ So Hare's thesis needs to be modified. It is *regular* orders that imply Can; likewise regular Oughts. Oddball orders, like oddball Oughts, do not. And what makes for oddness is offbeat intentions in those who issue the commands. They do not want to be obeyed. The modified thesis becomes that prescriptions (including Oughts) imply Can *when they are sincere*, i.e: when compliance is what the prescriber has in mind.

This is an exercise in monster-barring. Counterexamples which don't comply with Hare's thesis are dismissed as atypical, odd or monstrous, and the conjecture itself is restricted to a 'safe domain' of 'regular' prescriptions. I see three objections to this.

i) Luther's prescriptions aren't as odd as all that. Only someone hopelessly corrupted by prescriptivism would deny that the commands of God, of the parents and of

the 'faithful' physician really are commands. The Ten Commandments in particular are cited by Hare himself as paradigm prescriptions, as they surely would have been for Luther and Erasmus. It is true that Luther gives them a singular interpretation (or at least sets them in an unusual context) but this does not undermine their status as commands. In fact, Hare's original thesis has been given up. What it *now* amounts to is that *most* orders (and hence most Oughts) imply Can. What started off as a logical truth has become dangerously close to a sociological generalization.

ii) Suppose we concede that *sincere* Oughts and orders (in the sense defined above) imply Can. Since sincerity consists in having certain intentions, namely that ones commands be complied with, this suggests that it is not the prescription itself, but the prescription plus the speaker's intentions (or perhaps the speaker's *presumed* intentions) that generates the implication. This in turn leads to the idea, discussed below (§7), that the 'implies' in Ought-Implies-Can is a case of conversational implicature. Usually people who issue prescriptions want them complied with. (That is why they are issued in the first place.) It is reasonable to assume that they think this can be done. So *in many contexts* Oughts and orders conversationally imply Can. But again, this is a long way short of a logical truth.

iii) My last reply is that even sincere Oughts do not always imply Can, and that the same goes for sincere orders. I shall illustrate this by means of an example derived from David Lewis.

Suppose we have a physician (in fact a G.P.) who is *really* faithful and is not in the habit of tormenting her patients with mocking commands. When she tells someone to do something or that it ought to be done, she wants them to do it. One of her patients is a slave to nicotine and is, in consequence, rather sick. 'What you really ought to do', says she, 'is give up smoking. But you are such an addict that cutting it out is impossible. As second best what you ought to do is cut down. Twenty a day is better than eighty. I hope

you can manage that.' Now the exact nature of these Oughts need not detain us here. They are partly prudential, perhaps partly moral, since the doctor feels that people are *obliged* to take proper care of themselves. Either way, the Ought-Implies-Can principle ought to apply. But clearly it does not. What the patient *really* ought to do is what he can't do, namely give up smoking altogether. Although this is impossible, the Ought is not withdrawn. It remains in force and indeed enjoys a superior status to the second-best Ought that is offered in its stead. If Hare's thesis (as modified by me) were correct, what the doctor says should sound logically odd. In fact, it is quite in order. It raises no logical eyebrows.

I suppose Hare might reply that what I have put into the doctor's mouth is a loose form of words. What she *should* have said - indeed, what she really *meant* - is the following: 'You ought to give up smoking if you can. Since you can't you ought to cut down.' Here, the first Ought is the consequent of a conditional and is not asserted in its own right. It is because we are dimly aware of this, that what she actually says does not offend our sense of logical decency.

This is a desperate ploy. Ought-Implies-Can is given up as regards natural language and confined to the deep structure that lies behind the spoken word. Such a claim makes sense and might even be true. But it is decidedly strained and requires rather more by way of argument than Hare has managed to supply.

Another tactic would be to restrict the thesis yet again. The safe domain of the conjecture is contracted so as to exclude the doctor's impossible Ought. We might, for instance, mark out a class of *active* Oughts to which the doctor's first Ought does not belong. Ought-Implies-Can is then confined to active Oughts.

It would be difficult to carry this off without circularity. What are inactive Oughts after all but Oughts to which Ought-Implies-Can does not apply? And what are active

Oughts but Oughts which comply with the principle? Circularity would render Ought-Implies-Can trivial: Those Oughts imply Can which imply Can. But if this problem is overcome and 'active' is defined in such a way as to include the doctor's second suggestion, the revised principle is still false. For the doctor's second-best Ought although active and sincere does not imply Can. She *hopes* the addict can cut down but is by no means sure that he can do so. She is hopeful but agnostic about the patient's self-control. Nor would she withdraw the Ought if it proved impossible. 'You ought to give it up', she would say, 'and failing that you ought to cut down. If you can't do either there is nothing more I can do for you.' It may be that the smoker can't comply with his medical duties. But though he can neither give up nor cut down he ought to do one or the other.

What about orders? Do they imply Can when uttered sincerely? Suppose our doctor is a little more brusque and authoritarian. Instead of oughts, she deals in straight imperatives. 'Give up smoking! If you can't cut it out, cut it down. I hope you can manage that at least.' Her bedside manner leaves something to be desired, but again, she raises no logical eyebrows. Now what is the status of here first command? She obviously thinks it cannot be complied with. Is she implicitly *withdrawing* it in the face of the patient's inability to obey? My intuitions are equivocal. I am just not sure. But as regards the *second* command the case is clear. The doctor does not imply that it can be obeyed; she merely hopes that this is so. Orders, therefore, need not imply Can even when they are sincere.

6. Logic, Morals and Ought-Implies-Can

What is the lesson of all this? The first is that we should not confuse logic and ethics. Hare and Erasmus share the same basic objection to the Luthers of this world. To demand the impossible is unfair and unkind. Luther's fond parent and faithful physician, and his other commanders of what can't be done, are a sneering and sarcastic crew, despite their logical probity. And their alleged benevolence is distinctly dubious. Luther's God in condemning those who could not do otherwise than sin was obviously

wicked - and wicked in Christian terms too, manifestly unmerciful and unloving. Any humane moral code will include the precept that (in general) you don't command what can't be done and that you are not (usually) obliged to perform the impossible. So far the intuitions of Hare and Erasmus are sound. But they over-reach themselves by trying to fasten a *logical* rather than a *moral* absurdity on their opponents. And this cannot be done, at any rate within the context of a prescriptivist meta-ethic. Luther may be wrong, but he is not in Erasmus' sense, ridiculous.

The second point is that Ought-Implies-Can is not a *logical* principle and should not be included within a deontic logic. This may look like an overstatement. Surely all I have shown (if I am right) is that it cannot be justified within a prescriptivist framework. But such justifications as are offered for the logical status Ought-Implies-Can tend to be of a prescriptivist sort, even when deontic logicians are not professed prescriptivists. (See eg von Wright (1963) pp. 108ff.) Another argument (sometimes spiced with considerations of blameworthiness) is that the principle is plausible in itself - *morally* plausible that is. But a deontic logic should provide a framework within which *any* coherent morality can be expressed, no matter how repellent. It should not artificially favour the decent and the humane. Finally it is urged by Schotch and Jennings (1981) that 'it is accepted among moral philosophers' that 'Ought' should be so interpreted as to validate Ought-Implies-(logically)-Can (p. 149) - presumably because 'that principle cuts across all moral theories' (p. 156). But the very *existence* of Luther's moral system demonstrates that this is false. Indeed, this failure to cut across all theories demonstrates that Ought-Implies-Can is *not* a logical truth. For the truths of deontic logic are *required* to cut across all moral theories.

Now the consequences of this may be quite momentous. For it is not clear that an interesting deontic logic can survive the sacrifice of Ought-Implies-Can. Schotch and Jennings base their argument for the existence of deontic logic on the validity of this principle. (For there to be such a subject as deontic logic (they claim) there must be at least one logical truth which turns on the meaning of Ought; and Ought-Implies-

(logically)-Can is it.) And it is indeed true that the standard systems of deontic logic would be castrated if the principle were lopped off. Still, the loss of Ought-Implies-Can is not an automatic death-sentence for the subject. There are non-standard deontic systems based on relevant and paraconsistent logics which limp along without it (See Priest (1988) and Routley and Plumwood (1984)). The trouble is that they too depend on dubious principles which others are willing to sacrifice on the altar of Ought-Implies-Can. (See Schotch and Jennings on K.) However, I shall not pursue the issue here. The point remains that if important principles such as Ought-Implies-Can fall away, we may well wonder whether there are any interesting principles peculiar to, and pervasive of, all moral reasoning and hence a deontic logic worth preserving. It *opens the way* for scepticism about deontic logic. Perhaps some topic-neutral logic (supplemented by structural principles that figure explicitly as premises) would provide a more perspicuous (and less tendentious) representation of moral reasoning. This chimes in with an insight of the younger Prior (an insight he may have lost later on): 'The "logic of ethics" is not a special branch of logic but an application of it'. (See Prior (1949) p.ix. See also Pigden (1989).)

7. Ought, Can and Conversational Implicatures

But the reader may feel uneasy. Surely there is a grain of truth in the arguments of Erasmus and Hare. *Normally* we would expect someone who gave an order or issued an Ought to imply a Can, and to withdraw the Ought or order in the face of a Can't. And this is not just a fad of humane moralists, but something to do with the *nature* of Oughts and orders; with the *point* of such linguistic devices. The relationship between orders, Oughts and Cans is, if not logical, at least quasi-logical. This is the view of Sinnott-Armstrong (1984). He thinks that Ought *conversationally* implies (or implicates) Can in something like the sense defined by Grice (1975).

Conversation is a cooperative enterprise, and, as such, governed by a cooperative principle - (roughly) that contributions to a conversation should further the accepted

purpose of the exchange. (Of course, though conversation *is* a cooperative enterprise, this does not mean the participants are cooperative in the ordinary sense of the word. They may be out to do each other down in debate, or even be trading insults. Still, these are games that are played by certain rules. Hence participants must be minimally cooperative, to the extent of obeying those rules if they are to win.) The cooperative principle issues in certain 'conversational maxims' - to be as informative as, but no more than, the conversational purpose requires, not to say what one hasn't good grounds for believing, and (most importantly) '*Be relevant!*' Now, 'p conversationally implies q when saying p for a certain purpose cannot be explained [in the context of the relevant maxims] except by supposing the speaker thinks that q and thinks that the hearer can figure out that the speaker thinks that q etc. (Sinnott-Armstrong p. 256). (This formulation isn't quite right, since owing to the underdetermination of theory by data, there are explanations of the speaker's behaviour which *don't* make this assumption. Sinnott-Armstrong should have said that the speaker's utterances are *best* explained on this basis.) Conversational implicatures, moreover, can be *cancelled*. (Indeed, as I have argued in §5, an impossible Ought which is superseded by a second-best obligation need not even be *withdrawn*.) That is, a speaker who would normally be taken to imply q can deny, without self-contradiction, that q is what he intends. (Thus my doctor's expressed *hope* that the patient can cut down *Cancels* the implicature that this is, in fact, possible.)

Conversational implicatures are relativized to the presumed purpose of a conversational exchange. Sinnott-Armstrong notes that Oughts are used for a wide range of purposes but that for some of these - arguably the central ones - Ought conversationally implies Can - namely, when 'ought' is used to *advise* (on imminent action) or when it is used to *blame* (when it implies Can or Culpably Cannot). Even in the context of advice however, the impossibility of an Ought does not mean it is *denied* by the speaker, even if it is *withdrawn*. If I cannot do what I ought as a result of a previous failing, my advisor may well dish up a second-best Ought as to what I should do *now*, in my fallen state, without denying that what I truly ought to do is what is longer

possible. (Indeed, as I have argued in §5, an impossible Ought, which is superseded by a second-best obligation need not even be *withdrawn*.)

I think Sinnott-Armstrong is substantially correct. However, I have several comments to make.

(1) Anyone looking at morality and Oughts in a naturalistic and anthropological spirit, can hardly fail to conclude that the object of the institution is to modify human behaviour. It is but a short step to taking the advisory function as *central*. Since when giving advice, Ought conversationally implies Can, it is easy to mistake this implicature for entailment or (Strawsonian) presupposition (especially if the notion of conversational implicature has not been invented yet). Indeed, something like this appears to have been Hare's mental process. But it is clearly a mistake. It may be that the advisory function of 'ought' is central. Perhaps it is part of the 'logic of the concept' (in a loose sense) that it be so used; in that without this central use the concept would not have evolved and might not be sustained. But this does not mean that features of this (alleged) central use can be read into the logic of 'ought' in a narrower sense i.e. as determining implications or entailments. The semantic properties of a word are NOT decided by the language-game from which it arose. Thus an Ought may be unable to fulfill its advisory function unless it can be obeyed, and the word 'ought' might not *exist* in the absence of this function. Still, not all Oughts imply Can or even conversationally imply Can. If you want to understand the meaning and implications of a word *do not* (*pace* Wittgenstein) confine yourself to the language-game that was its original home. It may have grown up in the meantime, and may always have been something more than the daughter of the house. However, the tendency to concentrate on the original language-game, explains why Ought-Implies-Can was elevated to the status of a logical truth.

(2) Similar remarks apply to orders as distinct from Oughts. Their primary function is to modify behaviour by getting people to do the things commanded. They

cannot fulfill this function when the modified behaviour is impossible. Hence orders (when employed for their standard purpose) conversationally imply Can. But once invented, orders can be employed for other purposes besides. And when employed for these purposes, they need not even conversationally imply Can. This is the case with the ordinary language orders cited by Luther. (§4 a, b, c and d.) The fond parents, the faithful physician and the insulting foes are none of them out to modify behaviour *in accordance with their commands*. Nor are their utterances best explained on this basis.

Note also that the argument for orders-imply-Cans, feeble though it is, only works if orders are regarded as human linguistic inventions. Suppose God (as Luther thought) is not only the arch-giver of orders but the originator of orders as a linguistic category. Then arguments as to what God's orders *must* imply, from what human orders (construed as socially evolved devices) typically *do* imply, will not be very compelling. For given Luther's theological premises, orders as a semantic category are not the products of human custom.

But there is another reason why it is not merely impious, as Luther hints, but *absurd* for 'reason' to 'base her judgement of things and words that are of God upon the customs and concerns of men'. The beliefs and intentions that we can reasonably read into a *man* who makes some utterance will be a poor guide to what *God* thinks when he says the same thing. Hence conversational implicatures will not carry over.

This is a general remark and goes beyond Christianity. Obviously, if the Gods wish to communicate with mankind, they must use human language. At least, this is what they must do if they make use of scriptures or human spokesmen. And, with the possible exception of the Homeric Gods, they are usually depicted as truthful. Oracles and prophets do not lie.

But they do *mislead*. A good half of the prophecy stories in classical literature are

based upon prophecies that are misunderstood. And the reason is that more is read into them than is really there. They are taken to imply what a *human* speaker could reasonably be presumed to imply. That is, the prophecy *p* is best explained by supposing that the prophet or oracle believes *q*, and believes that the hearer can figure out that the speaker believes *q* etc. At least, this would be the best explanation if the speaker were a human being. But the speaker is either God or a human being acting as God's mouthpiece. Now, since the purposes of the Gods' are very different from the purposes of men the 'maxims' governing a God-to-human exchange are very different from those governing a human to human exchange. Expectations and implications derived from one will not apply to the other. How unlucky for Croesus that he did not understand the nature of conversational implicatures when he consulted the oracle! If he had the opportunity to read Grice, a great kingdom (his own) might not have been destroyed when he went to war!

(3) The cooperation principle and the conversational maxims are intended to be transcendental. They specify how (human) conversations *must be*. But this is partly achieved by leaving them empty of content, so that the detailed application of the maxims is determined by the shared beliefs of conversational players. Consider '*Be relevant!*' At Wallenstein's council of war the *Generalissimus* is wondering whether to order an advance. 'But your Highness', a colonel objects, 'Mars and Saturn are in conjunction!'⁹ At Wallenstein's court, the colonel will have made a pertinent comment, given the shared beliefs of the company. But if a colonel made the same comment at *Foch's* council of war his irrelevance would indicate insanity. Relevance therefore is relativized to background beliefs, and so too is conversational implicature.

Now, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, when we are playing the blaming game, Ought conversationally implies either Can or Culpably Cannot. That is, when a speaker gives tongue to a blaming Ought, this is best explained by supposing the speaker believes the Can (or Culpably Cannot) and thinks that the hearer can figure out that the speaker believes it. *Why? Why* can't the speaker's Ought be explained except by supposing he

believes the Can? A transcendental explanation - i.e. one based on the supposed nature of blaming exchanges and designed to give the conditions to which they *must* conform - runs as follows: The *point* of blaming someone, is not just to make them feel guilty, but to encourage reform. Hence there is little to be gained from blaming someone for acts or failings which they cannot avoid or could not have avoided by previous good behaviour. (Culpably Cannot means, for Sinnott-Armstrong, *cannot because of some avoidable prior lapse*.) But one can play the blaming game without intending to reform anyone. (Consider the condemnation of elderly and hardened war-criminals, or the blaming of those who are not participants in the conversation.) Thus the purpose of reform is *not* necessary to the blaming game, and the transcendental justification of the implicature does not always apply. Why then do we find Sinnott-Armstrong's examples persuasive? *Because most of us, in common with Sinnott-Armstrong's imagined speakers, believe some form of Ought-Implies-Can.* This is not a logical principle but part of our ethic. We don't think people are bound by impossible obligations, unless, perhaps, it is their fault that the obligations can't be met. This is the morality of a merciful and democratic culture which believes that decency is common - that is, accessible to all. Since we believe in Ought-Implies-Can, if Brown attempts to blame Adams by citing an unmet Ought, this can only be explained on the assumption that Brown believes Adams could have met his obligations, and believes that the hearer can figure this out etc. *For us*, Ought conversationally implies Can in the context of blame, since Ought-Implies-Can is among our moral beliefs. *For others* - the stern adherents of a Lutheran ethic for instance - the principle is *not* among their moral beliefs and the conversational implicature does not hold. The upshot of this is that conversational implicatures cannot provide a firmer basis for deontic principles than our moral intuitions, since they are, in many cases, the *products* of those intuitions. In some contexts, at any rate, Ought-Implies-Can is only a *quasi-logical* principle, because it is a *moral* principle common to the participants in a conversation. (Though I do not deny that in *other* contexts it is the 'transcendental' considerations that sustain the implicature.)

(4) A final point. In the course of this paper I have gone along with the prescriptivist thesis that Oughts are disguised imperatives or, more precisely, that Oughts *contain* imperatives. For Hare thinks Oughts are prescriptive, and it is the mark of prescriptive utterances that they entail imperatives. Since Hare also thinks that if *A* entails *B*, *B* must be contained within *A*, it follows that imperatives are contained in standard Oughts. However, I think this thesis false. Oughts, as ordinarily used, do *not* entail imperatives. They can be sincerely believed in without being acted on, even when there is no neurotic compulsion and no trumping Ought to inhibit action. However, I do not intend to denounce prescriptivism here. Rather I wish to suggest a grain of truth in Hare's doctrine which may explain its widespread appeal. Oughts do not *entail* imperatives. But in a wide range of contexts imperatives are what they *con conversationally imply*.

8. Theological Coda: Free Will without Pelagianism - A Way Out For Erasmus

That disposes of the question we started with. But you may be sufficiently interested in the theological issue to want to pursue it further. How does Luther justify God's commands given that they can't be fulfilled? God like the parents of a) and the 'faithful physician' of b) issues his edicts 'that by his law He may bring us to a knowledge of our own impotence if we are his friends.'(p. 153).

By this means man is brought to a proper state of penitence and despair, the necessary prerequisites for grace. But this only goes for the elect, God's friends, who are predetermined to feel penitence. What of God's 'proud enemies', those predetermined to rebellion and disobedience? For them God's ordinances are like the mocking commands of human enemies. The humiliating knowledge of human weakness provides a foretaste, in this world, of the misery that is to come. (p. 153.)

What are we to say to this? It may be, indeed it *is*, logically in order. There is no conceptual absurdity in the idea that we are bound by a law we cannot keep. But it is

morally monstrous, the sickest of sick men's dreams. God is depicted as a bully and a tyrant who delights in the misery of his creatures and only saves those he has predetermined to grovel.

And strangely enough Luther admits as much. At least he admits that this is how things *look*. 'God conceals his eternal mercy behind wrath his righteousness beneath unrighteousness....[He] seems in Erasmus' words to delight in the torment of poor wretches and to be a fitter object of hate than of love.' (p. 101.) Why does He do all this? Well in some moods Luther flatly asserts that it is a mystery and enlarges on the arrogance of human enquiry. But in others he suggests that it is in order that God should be an appropriately implausible object of Faith. For 'if I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of unrighteousness, can be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith. But as it is the impossibility of understanding makes room for the exercise of faith....,' (p. 101). Faith, it seems must not merely transcend, but outrage human reason. God conceals His true nature so that the elect will have something sufficiently idiotic to believe in. He righteously damns those who cannot do otherwise than sin, so that the faithful can do violence to the rational capacities God has given them by assenting to His existence. 'Credo quia ineptum' indeed!

But whatever the merits of Luther's *solution* the very fact that he acknowledges a *problem* confirms what Erasmus should have been arguing all along - that some version of Ought-Implies-Can is a highly plausible *moral* principle. If we are not (usually) obliged to perform the impossible, but ought to obey God's commands, it follows that they are not (in the main) impossible. *Or* if it is (usually) wrong to command what can't be done, then God, being supremely just, will not have done so (especially if the penalty is damnation). Hence compliance with the commandments is within our power and the will is free. Thus Luther's doctrines are not *logically* but *morally* absurd - or at least the logical absurdity consists in investing a supposedly just God with properties that imply the very opposite. Erasmus' argument for Free Will is restored, albeit with a revamped

premise.

This brings us back to Luther's objection deferred from §4. a) Erasmus' argument (even in this revamped version) 'proves too much'. If valid, it establishes the plenary Free-Will of the Pelagians, the power without grace to obey the commandments. It removes original sin, and with it the necessity for grace. It is, therefore, hopelessly heterodox. b) Erasmus' conclusion is obviously false. None of us, not even the most saintly, can succeed in loving the Lord with all our heart and all our strength and all our might. Yet from this all the other commandments hang. (*Matthew* 23. 37-40. Luther p. 164-5.)

Objection b) can be answered with a little creative exegesis (no more creative than Luther himself is prepared to employ). *Some* of the Lord's instructions are to be regarded not as commandments, but as counsels of perfection - what we ought to strive for, rather than what we are required to do. (That there are such counsels in Scripture is obvious from *Matthew* 19.21. 'If thou wilt be perfect etc....') As for the point that the other commandments 'hang' from the injunction to love the Lord, all this means is that anyone who loves the Lord *fully*, won't have any trouble obeying the commandments. But this doesn't mean they can't be obeyed in the absence of such love.

Of more philosophical interest is the answer to a). Erasmus' argument 'proves' that we can obey the commandments. But it doesn't prove that we can obey the commandments *without grace*. However, to rescue Erasmus from Pelagianism, we need a Nozickian 'philosophical explanation' which shows how Free Will, the ability to obey the commandments, and the corruption of human nature due to original sin are conjointly possible. First we must distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic powers. I have the power to get to Invercargill from Dunedin within three hours. But this power is *extrinsic*, conferred on me by my car. It is not *intrinsic*, belonging to me by virtue of my bodily and intellectual functions. It would take me much longer to reach Invercargill using only my own legs. According to Samuel Butler, 'the principal varieties' of the 'human race' are

'the rich and the poor'. This is due to a difference in 'physical organization'. 'The rich man can go from [New Zealand] to England whenever he feels inclined. The legs of the other are by an invisible fatality prevented from carrying him beyond certain narrow limits.' The joke here is that an extrinsic power, conferred by wealth is treated as an intrinsic power, due to 'physical organization'. (Butler (1921))¹⁰ Extrinsic powers, however, are partially dependent on intrinsic powers. My car would be no help to me if I did not have the use of my limbs or did not know how to drive. Even the paralysed billionaire, with the maximum of extrinsic, and the minimum of intrinsic, power, must be able to communicate. Otherwise she could not make use of her wealth.

Now this distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic powers enables us to develop a theory of Free Will and grace which fits in quite neatly with Erasmus' semi-Pelagian¹¹ ideas. The human will is free. *Some* of our choices are not determined by what has gone before¹² (though the range of options may be restricted by past choices and our stock of pre-existing desires). However, the will is constrained by objective probabilities, and because of original sin these are weighted towards evil. So although we are not *determined* to choose wrongly at any instant, it is probable that we will do so. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that we will *persist* in a course of virtue over a period of time.¹³ We cannot, for instance, acquire the habit that is justice; the constant and perpetual will to render each one his due. It is thus impossible, or nearly impossible, for unaided man to keep the commandments. It is not within our *intrinsic* capacities.

It is, however, within our *extrinsic* powers. For if anyone freely chooses the right and calls on God's assistance, he will be rewarded with grace. This overcomes original sin, restoring the balance of probabilities. It enables man to persist in virtue and thus to keep the commandments. It confers an extrinsic power. Grace is the motor-car in which drive on to righteousness.

From a Christian point of view this theory has many advantages. It reconciles Free Will with original sin thus combining moral responsibility with the need for grace.

It avoids the unseemly proliferation of grace-entities that tends to disfigure more Augustinian theories. And (most importantly) it allows us to combine Divine justice and the moral remnant of Ought-Implies-Can without committing us to the plenary Free Will of Pelagius. God does not command the impossible. Hence the commandments can be kept. But they can't be kept by unaided man. To persist in virtue is not within our intrinsic power. It *is* within our *extrinsic* power, however, since grace enables us to act rightly. The Ought of a just God's command *does* imply Can - but not Can-without-God's-assistance. This casts no slur on God's justice however, since He will supply the assistance when requested. The theory even has textual support: *Matthew* 19.26 'With God all things are possible' - virtue included.

This seems to have been what Erasmus was groping for. (He had everything except rigour, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic powers, and objective probabilities bending us towards sin.) Indeed, something like this seems to have been widely believed in Medieval times. (See Peter Lombard *Sentences* in Potts ed. (1986) pp. 92-93.) Naturally Luther had his objections. I shall consider only one. 'This hypocrisy of theirs' - that is the tendency of Erasmus and 'the sophists' to deny they are Pelagians - 'results in their rating and seeking to purchase the grace of God at a much cheaper rate than the Pelagians [proper]'. (p. 293f.) For the true Pelagians the price of grace is high; works 'complete, entire, perfect many and mighty' while for their semi-Pelagian opponents it is an endeavour which is almost nothing.

In part this argument rests on an equivocation - between 'grace' as what enables us to attain salvation, and 'grace' as salvation itself - and in part on a modal fallacy. Luther seems to think that if grace *enables* us to act rightly it likewise *ensures* that we will do so. But this is a mistake. By overcoming the bias towards sin and restoring the balance of probabilities, grace makes righteousness *possible*. It may even *incline* us towards good. But neither free will nor the need for moral effort have been eliminated. My car gives me the power to reach Invercargill within three hours. But it is not a magic carpet that carries

me there regardless of what I do. I must drive carefully and not dilly-dally on the way; that is, I must exercise my intrinsic powers. So too with grace. It emancipates us from original sin by giving us the power to persist in virtue. But to keep the commandments we must exercise our intrinsic powers and continually choose the right. And though it is grace that guarantees that we *can* do what (according to God) we ought to do, *doing it* is still down to us. The price of salvation - at least of salvation by works - is more than a mere endeavour. Action is required as well.

10. Conclusion

To sum up: 1. There is an antinomy in Hare's thought between Ought-Implies-Can and No-Indicatives-from-Imperatives. It cannot be resolved by drawing a distinction between implication and entailment. 2. Luther resolved this antinomy in the 16th century, but to understand his solution, we need to understand his problem. He thought the necessity of Divine foreknowledge removed contingency from human acts, thus making it impossible for sinners to do otherwise than sin. 3. Erasmus objected (on behalf of Free Will) that this violates Ought-Implies-Can which he supported with Hare-style ordinary language arguments. 4. Luther a) pointed out the antinomy and b) resolved it by undermining the prescriptivist arguments for Ought-Implies-Can. 5. We can reinforce Luther's argument with an example due to David Lewis. 6. Whatever its merits as a *moral* principle, Ought-Implies-Can is not a logical truth and should not be included in deontic logics. Most deontic logics, and maybe the discipline itself, should therefore be abandoned. 7. Could it be that Ought-Conversationally-Implies-Can? Yes - in some contexts. But a) even if these contexts are central to the evolution of Ought, the implication is not built into the semantics of the word; b) nor is the parallel implication built into the semantics of orders; and c) in some cases Ought conversationally implies Can, only because Ought-Implies-Can is a background *moral* belief. d) Points a) and b) suggest a criticism of prescriptivism - that Oughts do not *entail* imperatives but that the relation is one of conversational implicature. 8. If Ought-Implies-Can is treated as a *moral* principle, Erasmus' argument for Free Will can be revived (given his Christian assumptions). But it does not 'prove' Pelagianism as Luther supposed. A semi-Pelagian alternative is

available.¹⁴

NOTES

1. There is an obvious class of exceptions to this rule - logical truths. Since they follow from nothing at all, surely they follow from any set of imperatives. After all, the (imperative) premises can't be true without the (indicative) logically true conclusions being true too! However, there are ways of dealing with this degenerate case, the most obvious being to stipulate that the rule does not apply to logically true indicatives.
2. A similar antinomy between Ought-Implies-Can (or more properly Not-Can-Implies-Not-Ought) and No-Ought-From-Is is noted (and defused) by J. Brown (1977).
3. See Strawson (1950) 'On Referring'.
4. A point noted by Sinnott-Armstrong (1984) p. 254-5.
5. This is perhaps unkind. Hare tends to speak of logical 'intuitions' rather than sentiments. See Hare (1981) ch. 1 and pp 80-81.
6. *Diatribē seu collatio de libero arbitrio*. Of course, diatribe means discussion.
7. Pelagius did indeed use Erasmus' argument. See Passmore (1970) p. 94.
8. Anyone who thinks this sentence is vacuously true because the antecedent is necessarily false, merely demonstrates the inadequacy of his philosophical semantics.
9. If Feyerabend ever reads this, I hope he will forgive my ignorance of 17th century astrology.
10. What Marx calls fetishism seems to be an instance of 'Butler's fallacy' - ie. mistaking extrinsic powers conferred by social relations for intrinsic powers conferred by nature.
11. Compare the theory sketched here with that of Cassian, originator of semi-Pelagianism. (Passmore (1970) p. 98.)
12. Obviously this theory entails the rejection of the necessity of Divine Foreknowledge.

13. According to this theory Free Will does not preclude causality. Decisions are made on the basis of pre-existing desires and preferences. Where they conflict, the relative strength of the desires corresponds to the objective probability that the agent will act on them. Whatever desire the agent acts on is the one that indeterministically caused his choice. Thus we have a brand of Free Will which guarantees an intelligible connection between the agent's decisions and his psychological states. There will be no out-of-the-blue moral choices. Moreover it explains why human beings are moderately predictable (allegedly a problem for libertarian theories). We can often get a rough idea of someone's desires and estimate their relative strengths. Finally it allows for the possibility that some people are less free than others - a desideratum since some people resemble vicious (or virtuous) automata. A person is more or less free according to how closely the objective probability that they will act on some desire approaches 1. However, this is not the place to enlarge on the merits of the theory (based on the ideas of Graham Oddie.) I merely wish to suggest that this analysis of Free Will is plausible in itself and can be run with or without the postulate of original sin, biasing our choices towards the bad.

14. I would like to thank Graham Priest, Graham Oddie, Andre Gallois, Greg Currie, David Lewis and Derek Browne for useful comments.

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