Williams on *ought* – John Broome

1. Introduction

In Bernard Williams's collection *Moral Luck*,[1] his extraordinarily influential paper on reasons, 'Internal and external reasons', is followed by a brief paper on the other key normative concept, *ought*. It is entitled '*Ought* and moral obligation'. Williams returned to *ought* twenty years later in a lecture entitled '*Ought*, *must*, and the needs of morality', which he gave in Oxford on 28 October 2002.

I shall refer to '*Ought* and moral obligation' as 'OMO' for short, and to '*Ought*, *must*, and the needs of morality' as 'the Lecture'. The Lecture has not been published; it exists only in the form of the notes Williams lectured from. I shall quote from those notes, but please remember they do not represent Williams's polished arguments.[2]

In the Lecture, Williams explicitly rejected a central thesis of OMO. He said at the end:

> The view offered above, recognising the use of 'O' to express a relation between an agent and an action, represents a change from the position I argued in '*Ought* and moral obligation'.

This paper of mine has three main aims. One is to describe as well as I can the thesis that Williams rejected in the Lecture. The thesis is that no oughts are, as I put it, 'owned' by a person. (I hope I may be forgiven for using 'ought' as a noun.) I shall describe what I mean by ownership in section 5. In rejecting this thesis in the Lecture, Williams argued for the view that some oughts are owned. My second aim is to give support to this later view of his, by contributing (in section 7) a further argument on its behalf.

A third aim is to consider whether Williams in OMO really did accept the thesis that no oughts are owned. It is possible that in the Lecture he misinterpreted his own earlier paper. Under an alternative interpretation, Williams in OMO accepted that some oughts are owned. Under this interpretation, OMO was not about ownership; its purpose was to make a logical point about 'ought', that it denotes a propositional operator.

There is evidence in OMO for either interpretation. But I shall conclude in section 8 that Williams's own later interpretation is the correct one. The main basis for my conclusion is that otherwise OMO had little point. The claim that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator is almost trivial, as I shall explain in section 2. It has no ethical significance. On the other hand, whether some oughts are owned is a real and important issue within ethics.

Still, I cannot deny that the thesis explicitly presented in OMO is that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator. Since this is a thesis about logical structure, I initially have to sort out some formal matters of logic. It will be helpful to use some notation in doing so; I am sorry that has to happen before the real philosophy begins. It happens in section 2. I shall suggest there that Williams really meant to claim more specifically that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator that is not indexed to a person. Oughts are not indexed, as I shall put it.

In this paper I shall defend the opposite view that 'ought' sometimes denotes an indexed propositional operator. Section 3 deals with an initial objection to this view.

Section 4 explains that Williams did in fact recognize that some oughts are indexed in one particular way: they are indexed to a person by a motivational connection. So his thesis cannot be that no oughts are indexed; it must be weaker than that. Section 5 presents the idea of ownership for oughts as a sort of indexation. It interprets the thesis of OMO as the thesis that no oughts are owned. This interpretation is Williams's own in the Lecture. Section 5 also sets out and explains Williams's argument in the Lecture for the opposite view that some oughts are owned.

Section 6 describes the two positive arguments that can be found in OMO in favour of the

thesis that no oughts are owned, and argues that neither of them succeeds. Section 7 presents a counterexample to the thesis. Section 8 considers the possibility that Williams never meant in OMO to deny that oughts can be owned. But it argues that if that were so, it would leave us without a plausible interpretation of OMO.

Section 9 affirms my own conclusion that there are indeed owned oughts, as the Lecture also avers.

2. *Logical structure*

Compare

Alex ought to get a severe punishment

with

Alison ought to get a sun hat.

Assume these sentences are uttered in normal contexts rather than arcane ones. In normal contexts, they intuitively differ in their logical structure, even though they have the same grammar.

Gilbert Harman once suggested the difference is that 'ought' in the Alex sentence denotes a propositional operator, whereas 'ought' in the Alison sentence denotes a relation between an agent and a possible course of action.[3] Using 'O^{prop}' and 'O^{rel}' for those two meanings of 'ought', Harman might have formalized the sentences:

O^{prop}(Alex gets a severe punishment)

and

O^{rel}<Alison, get a sun hat>.

Harman's view may be stated in general form. Let a 'simple ought sentence' be a sentence of the form '*A* ought to *F*', where '*A*' denotes a person and '*F*' is a verb phrase. Harman's view was that some simple ought sentences have the logical structure '$O^{prop}(A\ Fs)$' and some '$O^{rel}<A, Fing>$'.

'O^{prop}' can be rendered in English as 'It ought to be the case that'. As Harman would have seen it, the Alex sentence is equivalent to 'It ought to be the case that Alex gets a severe punishment'.

'$O^{rel}<A, Fing>$' says that a particular relation holds between *A* and *F*ing. In section 5, I shall describe the particular relation that I believe Harman had in mind. I do not have a good, unambiguous way of rendering the relation 'O^{rel}' in English. But I shall offer a quasi-English surrogate at the end of this section.

In OMO, Williams disagreed with Harman. He argued that 'ought' always has the same logical structure: it always denotes a propositional operator. But the real issue between Williams and Harman cannot be whether 'ought' always denotes a propositional operator, or sometimes a relation. The meaning of *any* simple ought sentence '*A* ought to *F*' can be expressed either way: by means of a propositional operator or as a relation between *A* and *F*ing. I shall explain how.

It is obvious that '*A* ought to *F*' describes *some* relation between *A* and *F*ing, as Williams recognizes. (OMO, 115) Even a sentence of the form 'It ought to be the case that *A Fs*' does so, even though it explicitly uses a propositional operator. It describes, in Williams's words, the relation of 'being someone with regard to whom it ought to be the case that he …'. (OMO, 115) If it ought to be the case that Alex gets a severe punishment, then Alex stands in that relation to getting a severe punishment. He is someone with regard to whom it ought to be the case that he gets a severe punishment.

Harman was not making the obvious point that the sentence '*A* ought to *F*' describes *some* relation between *A* and *F*ing. As Williams observed (OMO, 115), he meant more than that.

He was saying that 'A ought to F' sometimes says that some other *particular* relation holds between A and Fing. 'O^{rel}' denotes this relation.

But suppose Harman was right, and some simple ought sentences have the logical structure '$O^{rel}{<}A, F\text{ing}{>}$', saying that the particular relation O^{rel} holds between A and Fing. Even then, we can alternatively use a propositional operator to say that this same relation holds between A and Fing. We do this by defining a propositional operator in terms of O^{rel}. That is possible whatever the relation O^{rel} specifically is.

Here is how we can do it formally. The definition is in two steps. First we define $O^{relprop}$ to be the relation that A stands in to the proposition that A Fs when A stands in the relation O^{rel} to Fing. So '$O^{relprop}{<}A, A\ F\text{s}{>}$' is defined to mean the same as '$O^{rel}{<}A, F\text{ing}{>}$'. Next we define $O_A^{relprop}$ to be the property of standing in the relation $O^{relprop}$ to A. That is to say, '$O_A^{relprop}(A\ F\text{s})$' is defined to mean the same as '$O^{relprop}{<}A, A\ F\text{s}{>}$'. The latter has already been defined to mean the same as '$O^{rel}{<}A, F\text{ing}{>}$'. So '$O_A^{relprop}(A\ F\text{s})$' is defined to mean the same as '$O^{rel}{<}A, F\text{ing}{>}$'. $O_A^{relprop}$ is a monadic property of propositions, which means it serves as a propositional operator. It takes the proposition that A Fs, and converts it to the proposition that $O_A^{relprop}(A\ F\text{s})$.

So even if 'A ought to F' means that a particular relation O^{rel} holds between A and Fing, its meaning can be expressed in the sentence '$O_A^{relprop}(A\ F\text{s})$', which uses a propositional operator.

Williams meant to deny something that Harman asserted, so he must have meant more than simply that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator. Here is a suggestion. Although $O_A^{relprop}$ is a propositional operator, it is indexed to the person A. Williams might have meant to say that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator that is not indexed to a person. This is not explicit in OMO; it is an interpretation extrapolated from what Williams said there.

Williams's later Lecture supports this interpretation. The Lecture repudiates Williams's earlier view about 'ought', but it helps to reveal what his earlier view was. At least it reveals what Williams later took his earlier view to have been. Denying his earlier view in the Lecture, he said:

> …. This means that 'N' has to be indexed to an agent, and this is equivalent to saying that it expresses a relation between an agent and an action. We can now see that the same is true of 'ought'.

(This is an extract from an argument that is quoted fully in section 5.) Williams was using 'N' to stand for 'must', which he treated as denoting a propositional operator. So in this quote Williams recognized the possibility of an indexed propositional operator. The quote shows he took his earlier view to have been that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator that is not indexed to an agent. He correctly took this to be equivalent to denying that it expresses a particular relation between an agent and an action.

In English, the expression 'It ought to be case that' denotes an unindexed operator. But English does not provide a corresponding expression that explicitly denotes an indexed operator. To make up this lack, I shall use the ungrammatical expression 'A ought that' as a translation of '$O_A^{relprop}$' into quasi-English. We can use these expressions to make explicit the intuitive difference between the Alex and Alison sentences. Those sentences mean respectively:

> It ought to be the case that Alex gets a severe punishment

and

> Alison ought that Alison gets a sun hat.

'Ought' in both these sentences denotes a propositional operator, but in the Alex sentence the operator is unindexed, whereas in the Alison sentence it is indexed to Alison.

I suggested that Williams's thesis in OMO was that 'ought' never denotes an indexed operator. That is to say, he thought a sentence '*A* ought to *F*' can always be correctly formulated as 'It ought to be the case that *A F*s'. No oughts are indexed, as I shall sometimes say. In sections 4 and 5 I shall explain that Williams's thesis cannot be as strong as that, and propose a weaker interpretation.

3. Indexed oughts

Take any sentence whose meaning can be expressed formally using the relation 'O^{rel}'. Its meaning can also be expressed by means of the corresponding indexed operator '$O_A^{relprop}$'. The converse is not true. There are sentences that can be expressed using the operator '$O_A^{relprop}$' that cannot be expressed by means of 'O^{rel}'. An example is '$O_{Alison}^{relprop}$(John gets a sun hat)' or in quasi-English, 'Alison ought that John gets a sun hat'. So the indexed operator has more expressive power than the relation.

Indeed, it has more expressive power than common English. In English, 'ought' is a modal auxiliary. That means it combines with a lexical verb to form a single compound verb, which can have just one subject. In 'Alison ought to get a sun hat', the compound verb is 'ought to get'. Its subject is 'Alison'. Whereas English provides a place for only one subject, the 'ought that' construction has places for two: one for the subject of 'ought' and one for the subject of 'get'.

I have seen the indexed operator '$O_A^{relprop}$' and its translation 'ought that' impugned on the grounds that their extra expressive power is misleading.[4] They are said to be able to describe impossible deontic situations. For instance, it is said that 'Alison ought that John gets a sun hat' does not describe any possible situation.

I see no harm in being able to describe impossible situations. Our language allows it often; we can say 'Maud is her own daughter', for instance. In any case, I am not convinced that the second subject-place is never needed for describing a possible deontic situation.

True, English can often do the same job in other ways. Take this example. Suppose Kevin ought to receive a medal from the king, and this ought is indexed to the king. To describe the situation, making the indexation explicit, I would say:

The king ought that Kevin receives a medal from the king.

This formulation exploits the expressive power of 'ought that'. However, the proposition that Kevin receives a medal from the king is the same as the proposition that the king gives Kevin a medal. So the sentence means the same as:

The king ought that the king gives Kevin a medal.

Here the subject of 'ought' is also the subject of the sentence that follows 'ought', so the extra generality of the 'ought that' construction is redundant. The sentence can be put into common English as:

The king ought to give Kevin a medal.

We can do without 'ought that' because '*A* receives *x* from *B*' can be transformed into '*B* gives *A x*'.

It is often assumed that a transformation like this is always possible – that when an ought is an indexed operator governing a proposition, the proposition can always be expressed by a sentence whose subject denotes the person the operator is indexed to. If that is so, it would mean that the second subject-place provided by 'ought that' is always redundant.

But I have not seen it proved that a transformation of this sort is always possible, and it would be surprising if it was. It is only a contingent feature of English that the word 'receives' is matched by the reciprocal word 'gives'. It would be surprising if our language always had the required words available whenever they were needed for describing an ought

using a particular grammatical form.

   Indeed, there is some evidence that it does not. Here is an example from Christen Krogh and Henning Herrestad:

>   The manager of a firm is under an obligation that the company's financial statement is reported to the company board once a month. Let us assume that this manager has a particularly helpful assistant. Without the manager's consent this assistant sends the financial statement to the board each month, thus seeing to it that the manager's obligation is fulfilled. … The manager's obligations are personal, but may be fulfilled by someone else.[5]

These authors use the expression 'is under an obligation that' instead of 'ought that'. Their first sentence is equivalent to:

>   The manager of a firm ought that the company's financial statement is reported to the company board once a month.

   The proposition that the company's financial statement is reported to the company board once a month cannot be expressed by a sentence that has 'the manager' as its subject. For one thing, it would be incorrect to say that the manager ought to see to it that the company's financial statement is reported to the company board once a month. If that were so, the assistant would not by her action see to it that the manager's obligation is fulfilled. The manager's obligation would be to see to something, and actually the manager sees to nothing despite what the assistant does. Yet Krogh and Herrestad tell us the assistant does indeed see to it that the manager's obligation is fulfilled. Perhaps their story is impossible, and the deontic situation could not be as they describe it. But until that is demonstrated, the example stands.

   So the extra subject-place provided by 'ought that' may be useful, and in any case I see no harm in it. 'Ought that' anyway serves the purpose of making the indexation of 'ought' explicit. There is an important difference in meaning between 'Alison ought that Alison gets a sun hat' and 'It ought to be the case that Alison gets a sun hat'.

4. Indexation by motivation

I suggested in section 2 that Williams's thesis in OMO was that no oughts are indexed. But that cannot be quite right, because Williams explicitly recognized that some oughts are in one way relative to a person. He said

>   '*A* ought to do *X*' in the practical sense is relativised to the agent's set of aims, projects, objectives, etc. (OMO, 120)

This relativization is a sort of indexation. So 'ought' in what Williams called 'the practical sense' is indexed.

   His argument for this point started from the remark:

>   In the practical or deliberative sense, '*A* ought to do *X*' will entail '*A* has a reason to do *X*', in what I have called the 'internal' sense of that claim. (OMO, 120)

When 'a reason' has Williams's internal sense, '*A* has a reason to do *X*' entails 'there is a sound deliberative route from *A*'s subjective motivational set … to *A*'s [doing *X*]'.[6] According to this remark, '*A* ought to do *X*' in the practical sense entails '*A* has a reason to do *X*'. So '*A* ought to do *X*' in this sense entails the same motivational conclusion that there is a sound deliberative route from *A*'s subjective motivational set to *A*'s doing *X*. Moreover, the entailment is supposed to be conceptual: part of the meaning of 'ought' in the practical sense is that it has this motivational connection to *A*. This means the connection can be treated as a sort of indexation: the ought is indexed to *A* by motivation.

Williams made this claim only of practical oughts. He had a different view about what he called 'moral oughts', by which he meant oughts that derive from moral obligation. He discussed the connection between moral oughts and motivation at the end of OMO. He considered 'agents who are outside the system of beliefs of those who are applying the notion of moral obligation'. (OMO, 122) He said that some 'moral considerations will be thought to apply … to an agent who refuses to respond to them'. (OMO, 122) If I understand him right, he meant to imply that this thought is true. He thought that moral considerations may make it the case that an agent ought to do something, even if the agent cannot be motivated by those moral considerations because she is outside the system of beliefs. Since he thought reasons entail that the agent can be motivated, he thought this agent has no reason to do what she ought morally to do.

Williams denied that, when a person morally ought to do something, the ought necessarily has a 'hold on' her or 'sticks to' her. (OMO, 122) I think these are metaphors for motivation. I think Williams was denying that a motivational connection necessarily holds between a moral ought and motivation. To put it more exactly, I think he was denying that, necessarily, if *A* ought to *F* on moral grounds, there is a sound deliberative route from her subjective motivational set to her *F*ing. He was denying for these moral oughts what he previously asserted for practical or deliberative oughts.

Still, Williams in OMO did think that practical oughts are indexed to a person by motivation. He therefore did not think that 'ought' always denotes an unindexed operator.

5. Ownership

Nevertheless, he must have meant to deny that oughts are indexed in some particular way, or he would not have disagreed with Harman. Indexation is a formal notion. When an ought is indexed to a person, some particular relation holds between the ought and the person. But the formal notion allows the relation to be of various different sorts. Williams did not mean to deny indexation as a motivational relation. What sort of indexation did he mean to deny?

I think it was the sort that is intuitively exemplified by the examples of Alex and Alison. It is the relation that holds between Alison and the ought when Alison ought to get a sun hat, but not between Alex and the ought when Alex ought to get a severe punishment.

I think we have a good intuitive grasp of this relation, but it is difficult to describe.[7] I say the ought *belongs to* Alison, or is *owned by* her. Those are only metaphorical expressions, but I hope they indicate their meaning successfully. For one thing, they describe a normative connection between the ought and the person, in contrast to a motivational one. I could say various other things to help elucidate the nature of the relation. I could say that Alison is responsible for getting a sun hat, or that Alison is at fault if she does not get a sun hat. I could say it is required *of* Alison that she gets a sun hat. None of these expressions is exactly right, but they indicate what I mean.

On the other hand, if Alex ought to get a severe punishment, the ought is not owned by Alex. He is not responsible for getting a severe punishment. He is not at fault if he does not get one. It is not required of him that he gets a severe punishment. That is the difference.

Williams's later Lecture interpreted indexation as ownership, in the course of arguing against the view it attributed to OMO. This argument is reproduced below. It is first directed at *must* and extended to *ought* at the end. In it, Williams uses 'N' as a propositional operator representing 'must'. Here is the argument:

> Consider an example of a practical necessity which (on Kantian categories) is non-moral. Hector thinks
> > (d)   I must confront Achilles,

and we take this to be of the form

    (e)   N(I confront Achilles).

But there is something odd about this, suggesting as it does that somehow there is a general requirement that this confrontation come about. But this confrontation is a matter of Hector's reasons, not anyone else's reasons. In this particular case, he can, as king, command others not to impede him, but that is an additional fact, not an entailment.

    Now we may think that this is because we are dealing with a non-moral, individual 'must'. But this is is not so. Consider

    (f)   Everyone must refrain from lying.

If we express this in the form:

    (g)   N[(x)Rx],

this does not allow for a familiar idea, that the message of (f) is just to the effect that each person should refrain from lying – it is not saying that we are confronted with a general project of there not being any lying. It may seem that this is simply a matter of scope, and that we can capture the required thought of (f) with

    (h)   (x)[N(Rx)].

But on closer inspection (h) does no better than (g). If we read it as 'with respect to everybody, there is the requirement that he not lie' – this doesn't actually say what action is required of whom. It seemingly does better than (g) only because we read 'N' as bearing on the person 'x'. In such a case, it has to be a given person whose action is in question. This means that 'N' has to be indexed to an agent, and this is equivalent to saying that it expresses a relation between an agent and an action.

    We can now see that the same is true of 'ought'.

  The oddness that Williams found in (e) 'N(I confront Achilles)' – 'suggesting that somehow there is a general requirement that this confrontation come about' – is that this formula does not ascribe ownership of the must to Hector. Williams next objected to (h) '($\forall x$)(N(x refrains from lying))', as a formulation of 'Everyone must refrain from lying', on the grounds that it 'doesn't actually say what action is required of whom'. There he did not express himself with crystal clarity. 'What action is required of whom' is ambiguous. 'Of whom' might be attached to 'action', in which case the clause would mean the same as 'what action of whom is required'. Alternatively, 'of whom' might be attached to 'required', which would prevent it from being moved forward in the clause. Williams's meaning is the second. '($\forall x$)N(x refrains from lying)' *does* say that, for all x, it is required that x refrains from lying. However, it *does not* say that, for all x, it is required of x that x refrains from lying. The formula '($\forall x$)N(x refrains from lying)' suggests that, for each person, somehow there is a general requirement that this person refrains from lying. It does not say that this is a requirement on any particular person. It ascribes ownership of the act of refraining from lying to x. But it does not ascribe ownership of the must to x.

  Evidently Williams thought that a must requires *of someone* that something happens. The formulae (e) and (h) say what is required to happen, but they are defective in failing to say of whom it is required. The idea that a must requires something of someone is unequivocally the idea that it belongs to someone. This is the plainest mention of ownership in the Lecture.

  So this passage from the Lecture argues that musts are owned, and goes on to say the same about oughts. In the text following the passage, it quickly turns out that Williams did not mean to conclude that *all* oughts are owned. Nevertheless, he plainly meant to conclude that

some are. And Williams in the Lecture meant to say that Williams in OMO denied that any oughts are owned. That is my interpretation of OMO too.

Correspondingly, I interpret Harman in the review criticized by Williams as affirming that some oughts are owned.

6. Williams's arguments

Now to the arguments Williams offered for the thesis that no oughts are owned. Remember that the claim he explicitly defended was that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator; it was not explicitly about ownership. In OMO, he offered one argument on behalf of moral oughts and one on behalf of practical oughts. I shall argue that both fail, and my arguments will not depend on the precise interpretation of their conclusion.

His argument in the case of moral oughts starts (OMO, 116) with Williams asking us to consider the pair of sentences:

(5) Someone ought to help that old lady

and

(6) Jones ought to help that old lady.

Williams said 'a claim such as (6) may … be supported by the claim (5), together with some consideration which specially selects Jones'. Then he said 'the occurrence of *ought* in (5) is as a propositional operator, and it is hard to see what requires it, or even allows it, to turn into something else in (6)'.

The argument appears to be that 'ought' must have the same meaning in (5) as in (6) because (6) is supported by (5) together with a consideration that selects Jones. This would be a sound argument if the support (6) gains from (5) was a matter of direct inference. In that case, 'ought' would have to have the same meaning in the premise (5) as in the conclusion (6). Compare the inference: 'Someone ought to stop shouting; no one apart from Jones is shouting; therefore Jones ought to stop shouting'. This is a valid inference just because 'ought' has the same meaning in the first premise as it has in the conclusion.

Spelt out, the first premise of the shouting inference is: 'There is someone who ought to stop shouting'. By contrast, claim (5) as Williams intended it is: 'It ought to be the case that someone helps that old lady'. The scope of 'ought' is wider in (5) than in the shouting example. Its wider scope means there is no direct inference to the conclusion (6), corresponding to the direct inference in the shouting example.

(5) may nevertheless support (6), but only in some broader way. Some implicit premise must be involved. Consequently, 'ought' need not have the same meaning in (5) as in (6); there may be an implicit premise that links two different meanings. For instance, the implicit premise may be the deontic principle that, whenever it ought to be the case that someone *F*s, and there is just one person who can *F*, then that person ought to *F*. The two 'ought's in this principle may have different meanings.

It is easy to see how the ought in (5) can 'turn into' a different ought in (6). (5) does not index the ought to anyone. In moving from (5) to (6), in some way involving an implicit premise, it gets indexed to Jones. So of course (6) indexes the ought to Jones. This argument fails, therefore.

Williams's argument in the case of practical oughts is, in its entirety:

Consider a joint deliberation as a result of which a speaker concludes

(9) One of us ought to go and inform the manager.

Keeping constant an interpretation of *ought* in the practical or deliberative sense, (9) still has two readings, and one of them requires the propositional operator. (OMO, 119)

Williams did not make the conclusion of this argument explicit, but it must be that the second reading also uses the propositional operator. The two readings of (9) that Williams had in mind are 'It ought to be the case that one of us goes and informs the manager' and 'One of us is such that he or she ought to go and inform the manager'. The first does not index the ought to anyone, and Williams concludes that the second does not either.

But why conclude that? Since (9) is ambiguous, why should it not be ambiguous between two meanings of 'ought'? I believe Williams was implicitly referring back a few pages to a place where he points out that the sentence 'Somebody ought to sweep this room' is ambiguous. There he says 'it is clear that its ambiguity lies in a familiar ambiguity of scope'. (OMO, 115) I assume Williams thought that the ambiguity in (9) also clearly lies in the scope of 'ought' rather than in the meaning of 'ought'. If the ambiguity is in scope rather than meaning, and one reading of the sentence does not index the ought, the other also does not. But Williams is not entitled to assume that the ambiguity lies in scope only. That must be a conclusion of the analysis, not a premise for it. The two 'ought's might have different meanings. So this argument also fails.

7. A counterexample
Neither of those two arguments succeeds, and I can find no other positive argument for Williams's thesis in OMO. (There are a number of responses to objections.) On the other hand, there is a strong argument against the thesis that no oughts are owned. It has an undesirable implication that is brought out by the following example.

It is an example of moral oughts.[8] I have designed it to mesh with Williams's discussion of moral oughts, which I outlined in section 4. Adam has promised his mother that he will do more homework in the next year than Eve does, whereas Eve has promised her mother that she will do at least as much homework in the next year as Adam does. I assume that making a promise puts a person under a moral obligation. So Adam ought morally to do more homework than Eve and Eve ought morally to do at least as much homework as Adam. Let us assume these oughts apply to Adam and Eve even if the two of them are outside the system of beliefs of those who are applying the notion of moral obligation. Let us also assume that both Adam and Eve are indeed outside this system; neither sees anything to be said for keeping promises. So there is no sound deliberative route from Adam's motivational set that would lead to his doing as he promised, and the same is true of Eve's motivational set. This is just the sort of situation that Williams claimed to be possible, at the end of OMO.

Neither ought is indexed to a person by motivation, therefore. Williams's thesis in OMO is that no oughts are owned, so neither of these oughts is indexed to a person by ownership either. According to this thesis, they are therefore unindexed oughts: it ought to be the case that Adam does more homework than Eve, and it ought to be the case that Eve does at least as much homework as Adam. Indeed, writing of promises, Williams said explicitly

> If *A* ought to keep his promise, then the analysis gives us that it ought to be the case that he keep it – that is (if you like) that a certain state of affairs should come about'. (OMO, 118)

('The analysis' refers to Williams's own analysis.)

But the proposition that Eve does at least as much homework as Adam is just the proposition that Adam does not do more homework than Eve. So as Williams would have seen it, it ought to be the case that Adam does more homework than Eve, and it ought to be the case that Adam does not do more homework than Eve.

It is therefore a consequence of Williams's thesis that, for some propositions p, it ought to be the case that p and it ought to be the case that not p. Let us call this a 'deontic conflict'.

My own view is that deontic conflicts are impossible. Williams himself was willing to countenance them in what he called 'tragic' cases, where whatever a person does will be wrong.[9] But he had particular reasons for thinking a person might find herself in such a tragic situation, and this example is nothing like one of those situations. It is undesirable to accept the possibility of a deontic conflict. We should not do so if we can avoid it.

And there is a very satisfactory way of avoiding it. It makes much better sense to see the two oughts as owned by different people. In the quasi-English I introduced in section 2, Adam ought that Adam does more homework than Eve, and Eve ought that Adam does not do more homework than Eve. Since these oughts are owned by different people, there is no deontic conflict.

You might think that my example is not possible – that there could not be opposed oughts as I described them, even owned by different people. Two doubts might trouble you. One is that these oughts may seem inconsistent with the principle that ought implies can. But they do not. True, it cannot be the case that both Adam and Eve do as they ought. But the principle of ought implies can requires only that each of Adam and Eve separately can do as he or she ought. We may assume that is so in the example. We have only to assume that each actually does less homework than the maximum that the other can do.[10] Since neither is motivated to keep his or her promise, that is easily assumed.

Your second doubt might arise from a deontic theory that implies opposing oughts are impossible – that it cannot be the case that one person ought that p when another person ought that not p. Agent-neutral theories have that consequence, because they say that everyone ought to promote the same aim. Utilitarianism is an example; it claims that everybody ought to promote whatever will achieve the most good.

In my example, I chose promising as a way of generating opposing oughts. I implicitly called on an agent-relative deontic theory that implies each person ought to keep her own promises. Any example like mine, with opposing oughts, would be blocked by an agent-neutral theory. So Williams could gain support from such a theory. But it would be the wrong sort of support. His claim that there are no indexed oughts was made on conceptual grounds. It was meant to be a feature of the meaning of 'ought'. It should not depend on the truth of a substantive deontic theory such as utilitarianism.

In any case, only an agent-neutralist is in a good position to resist an example like mine. This example provides strong evidence that there are owned oughts. The previous section showed that Williams's arguments on the other side are unsuccessful. I think we should accept that some oughts are owned. In the Lecture, Williams accepted it himself.

8. Did OMO recognize ownership?
There is even some evidence that he accepted it in OMO. In at least two places in OMO, Williams said things that seem to commit him to the existence of owned oughts. In one place, he said explicitly that an *obligation* (not an ought) can be owned by a person. He was there dealing with a case where Jones ought to have examined Smith, and he said 'the situation is one of obligation, and of an obligation which is Jones''. (OMO, 116) Jones was under an obligation to examine Smith, and his obligation explains why Jones ought to have examined Smith. But if Williams accepted that this is so, and that the obligation is owned by Jones, he was surely committed to thinking that the ought is owned by Jones. He seems especially committed because later in the paper, in a sentence I shall quote in the next paragraph, he said that obligations actually *are* oughts.

Elsewhere, Williams said: 'The class of moral obligations in the wider sense just *is* the class of *oughts* about an agent's actions to which blame and similar reactions are added'.

(OMO, 121) Blame implies ownership. If something ought to happen but does not, the person to blame is the one who owned the ought. Suppose Jones ought to have examined Smith but did not. We blame Jones rather than Smith because the ought was owned by Jones and not by Smith. Blame cannot be added to an ought unless the ought is owned. So when Williams said blame can be added to an ought, he implied that an ought can be owned.

So is it possible that Williams accepted all along that oughts could be owned? If he did, what was his disagreement with Harman – what was he arguing for in OMO? The answer could be the one he gave himself. His announced aim was to show that 'ought' always denotes a propositional operator, which Harman denied. Perhaps Williams always recognized that this propositional operator might be indexed by ownership. This is Ralph Wedgwood's interpretation of OMO.[11]

It is based on Williams's own words from OMO, but nevertheless I do not find it plausible. As I explained in section 2, any ought can be expressed by means of a propositional operator, if the operator can be indexed. It took me a few lines to demonstrate this point formally, but it is almost trivial. It is a point of logic, with no ethical significance. I doubt Williams would have written an article to defend it. His insistence that 'ought' always denotes a propositional operator has a significant content only if the operator is not allowed to be indexed.

Had Williams really accepted that oughts can be owned, I believe he would have made it clearer in the paper. In OMO he never even hinted that 'ought' might be indexed. He often represented ought sentences with formulae such as '$O(p)$' and '$O(A \text{ does } X)$', using 'O' for the propositional operator. There was never any suggestion that the operator might be indexed to a person. He always treated 'O' as equivalent to the unindexed English operator 'It ought to be the case that'. As an example, I have already quoted his remark:

> If *A* ought to keep his promise, then the analysis gives us that it ought to be the case that he keep it – that is (if you like) that a certain state of affairs should come about'. (OMO, 118)

The ought created by a promise is owned, if any is. Yet Williams used 'It ought to be the case that', and gave no hint that the operator might be indexed.

In the Lecture, Williams interpreted OMO as denying that oughts are owned. I accept this interpretation. But I do not claim that OMO is fully consistent throughout.

9. Conclusion

My own conclusion is that we have to recognize that some oughts are owned. There too, I agree with the Lecture. My chief reason is that, unless there are owned oughts, we are up against counterexamples like the one in section 7. The thesis that no oughts are owned leads to implausible deontic conflicts.

1. Cambridge University Press, 1981.
2. I thank Patricia Williams and Adrian Moore for permission to quote these notes.
3. Gilbert Harman, Review of *The Significance of Sense: Meaning, Modality and Morality* by Roger Wertheimer, *Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973), pp. 235–9. Harman did not actually described 'ought' as a propositional operator; he described it as a predicate of a state of affairs. But a predicate of a state of affairs also serves as a propositional operator. it takes the

proposition that a state of affairs obtains – in the example the proposition that Alex gets a severe punishment – and makes another proposition out of it – in the example the proposition that O$^{\text{prop}}$(Alex gets a severe punishment).

4 It has been criticized by Mark Schroeder in 'Do *oughts* take propositions?', available on philpapers.org.

5. C. Krogh and H. Herrestad, 'Getting personal: some notes on the relationship between personal and impersonal obligation', in *Deontic Logic, Agency and Normative Systems*, edited by Mark Brown and José Carmo, Springer-Verlag, 1996, pp. 134–153; quotation from p. 151. This example is quoted by Paul McNamara in 'Agential obligation as non-agential personal obligation plus agency', *Journal of Applied Logic*, 2 (2004), pp. 117–52. Each of these papers gives a valuable account of indexed oughts.

6. This formulation comes from one of Williams's later writings, 'Some further notes on internal and external reasons', in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, edited by Elijah Millgram, MIT Press, 2001, pp. 91–7. Quote from p. 91.

7. Lloyd Humberstone calls it 'agent-implicating' in 'Two kinds of agent-relativity', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 41 (1991), pp. 144–66.

8. Krogh and Herrestad's 'Getting personal' contains several other good examples.

9. Williams, 'Conflicts of values', in his *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 71–82, p. 74.

10. Caspar Hare and William Lycan impressed on me the need to make sure each person is able to do as he or she ought.

11. Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 91–3.