Does 'ought' imply 'can' from an epistemic point of view?

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that the "*Ought* Implies *Can*" (OIC) principle, as it is employed in epistemology, particularly in the literature on epistemic norms, is open to counterexamples. I present a counterexample to OIC and discuss several objections to it. If this counterexample works, then it shows that it is possible that *S* ought to believe that *p*, even though *S* cannot believe that *p*. If this is correct, then OIC, considered from an epistemic point of view, is false, since it is supposed to hold for any *S* and any *p*.

1. Introduction

Despite recent criticism (e.g., Saka 2000, Graham 2011), many still hold on to the *Ought-Implies-Can* (OIC) principle (e.g., Vranas 2007, Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007, Hattiangadi 2010, Littlejohn 2012). According to this principle, one ought to do something only if one can do it. More formally:

> (OIC) Necessarily, if *S* ought to φ, then *S* can φ.[1]

(OIC) is employed to do all sorts of theoretical work and philosophical heavy-lifting. In this paper, I will focus on the application of (OIC) to epistemology, particularly in the literature on epistemic norms. That is to say, for present purposes, the 'ought' in (OIC) is the epistemic ought. In this sense, to say that *S* ought to believe that *p* is to say that *S* has an epistemic obligation to believe that *p*. For present purposes, then, '*S* ought to believe that *p*' is equivalent to any of the following claims:

- *S* has an all-things-considered epistemic obligation to believe that *p*.

- *S* is epistemically required to believe that *p*.

- It would be epistemically impermissible for *S* not to believe that *p*.

- It would be epistemically wrong for *S* not to believe that *p*.

Accordingly, to subscribe to (OIC) is to hold that, if *S* is epistemically obligated to believe that *p*, then *S*—*qua* epistemic agent—has the ability and opportunity to believe that *p*.[2] In other words, the 'can' in (OIC) is stronger than the 'can' of metaphysical or nomological possibility. In the context of epistemic norms, I take it that proponents of (OIC) mean that, if *S* has an epistemic obligation to φ, then *S*—that very subject *qua* epistemic subject—has the ability to believe that *p*, not merely that the laws of nature are such that they do not preclude *S* from believing that *p*. The

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[1] For an overview of different formulations of (OIC), see Mizrahi (2009).
[2] Cf. Podlaskowski (2010) on doxastic 'oughts'.

'can' of (OIC), then, is the 'can' of specific ability and opportunity, as opposed to general ability and opportunity (Graham 2011, p. 342). For example, a kleptomaniac might have the general ability to refrain from stealing, but given her condition, she lacks the specific ability to refrain from stealing when she is in a department store and the goods are right in front of her (cf. Blum 2000). Similarly, if our kleptomaniac is on a deserted island, where there is nothing to steal, she does not have the opportunity to steal. In terms of beliefs, a person under anaesthesia might have the general ability to believe that p, but given her current condition, she lacks the specific ability to believe that p.

Accordingly, spelled out more fully, (OIC) is the following principle:

(OIC)   Necessarily, if S has an all-things-considered epistemic obligation to believe that p, then S has the specific ability and opportunity to believe that p (cf. Vranas 2007, pp. 169-170; Graham 2011, p. 342; Littlejohn 2012).

Among epistemologists, there are those who think that only true beliefs have fundamental, intrinsic epistemic value (Bonjour 1985, Latus 2000, Alston 2005, Douven 2008). For example, according to Bonjour (1985, p. 7):

What makes us cognitive beings at all is our capacity for belief, and the goal of our distinctively cognitive endeavors is *truth*: we want our beliefs to correctly and accurately depict the world. If truth were somehow immediately and unproblematically accessible […] so that one could in all cases opt simply to believe the truth, then the concept of justification would be of little significance and would play no independent role in cognition.

From this account of the value of true belief, there are those who derive epistemic norms concerning what one ought to believe. For example, according to Latus (2000, p. 31), "our epistemic goal is to believe all the truths there are and only those truths." Hattiangadi (2010) takes Latus' claim to be a normative one, i.e., that we ought to believe all the truths there are, and only those truths. More explicitly:

(OBT) S ought to believe all the truths there are, and only those truths.

Against (OBT), Hattiangadi (2010) argues that this epistemic norm violates (OIC). As Hattiangadi (2010, pp. 423-424) writes:

[(OBT)] cannot be correct, however, because it clearly violates the principle that ought implies can. Some true propositions are so complex that it is not humanly possible to believe them, and the true propositions are so numerous that it is not humanly possible to believe all of them. So, it must be false that we ought to believe all and only the true propositions.

Hattiangadi's argument, then, is that (OBT) must be false, since it says that subjects ought to do something they cannot do, namely, believe true propositions that are too complex. Since this is a violation of (OIC), (OBT) must be rejected.

Hattiangadi uses (OIC) to argue against other epistemic norms as well. For example, Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007) argue against the following epistemic norm:

(2) For any *S*, *p*: *S* ought to believe that *p* iff *p* is true.

They argue that (2) is ambiguous because 'ought' can take either wide or narrow scope. If 'ought' takes narrow scope, then (2) should read:

(2a) For any *S*, *p*: *S* ought to (believe that *p*) iff *p* is true.

And then they break (2a) down to two conditional statements:

(2a*) For any *S*, *p*: if the proposition that *p* is true, then *S* ought to (believe that *p*).

(2a**) For any *S*, *p*: if *S* ought to (believe that *p*), then the proposition that *p* is true.

Now, and this is the crucial part of their argument for present purposes, they argue that (2a*) is false. As Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007, p. 279) put it:

[(2a*)] says that for any true proposition, you ought to believe it. However, there are not only infinitely many true propositions, but, given that any conjunction of true atomic propositions is itself a true proposition, there must be some true propositions that are extremely complex—certainly far too complex for most humans to believe. Take a proposition that is too complex for you to believe. Since you cannot believe this proposition, and since 'ought' implies 'can', it follows that it must be false that you ought to believe the proposition, even if the proposition happens to be true. Since (2a*) is meant to hold for any subject and any proposition, but surely does not hold for propositions too complex to be believed, (2a*) must be false.

Their argument, then, can be reconstructed as follows:

(2a*)   For any *S*, *p*: if the proposition that *p* is true, then *S* ought to (believe that *p*). [Assumption for *reductio*]

(BH1)   If *p* is a true proposition that is too complex, then *S* cannot (believe that *p*). [Premise]

(BH2)   *p* is a true proposition that is too complex. [Premise]

(BH3)   (Therefore) *S* cannot (believe that *p*). [from (BH1) & (BH2)]

(OIC*)   Necessarily, if *S* ought to (believe that *p*), then *S* can (believe that *p*). [Premise]

(BH4)   (Therefore) It is not the case that *S* ought to (believe that *p*). [from (BH3) & (OIC*)]

(BH5)   (2a*) is supposed to hold for any *S* and any *p*. [from (2a*)]

(BH6)   But (2a*) does not hold when *p* is too complex. [from (BH4) & (BH5)]

(C1)   (Therefore) (2a*) is false. [from (BH5) & (BH6)] (Cf. Whiting 2010.)

Bykvist and Hattiangadi's arguments against epistemic norms, such as (OBT) and (2a*), then, clearly rely on (OIC), where (OIC) is slightly revised for the epistemic context in which it is employed.

> (OIC*) Necessarily, if *S* has an all-things-considered epistemic obligation to (believe that *p*), then *S* has the specific ability and opportunity to (believe that *p*).

(OIC*) thus appears to be a powerful weapon that epistemologists can deploy when they argue against epistemic norms of different sorts. In what follows, I will argue that (OIC*) is open to counterexamples. I will offer one such counterexample to (OIC*) considered from an epistemic point of view. If this counterexample works, then (OIC*) is false, for it is supposed to hold for any *S* and any *p*.[3]

2. The counterexample

Before I discuss the counterexample, let me briefly explain what I take the epistemic point of view to be. From an epistemic point of view, whether or not a belief is justified has something to do with the goal of truth, but it has nothing to do with moral, prudential, legal, aesthetic, or other considerations. As Alston (1985, pp. 83-84) puts it:

> Epistemic evaluation is undertaken from what we might call "the epistemic point of view." That point of view is defined by the aim at maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs […] For a belief to be justified is for it, somehow, to be awarded high marks relative to that aim […] Any concept of epistemic justification is a concept of some condition that is desirable or commendable from the standpoint of the aim at maximizing truth and minimizing falsity.

Accordingly, from a prudential point of view, it might be in one's self-interest to believe an unjustified proposition, for it might make one feel good. For example, from a prudential point of view, it might be in one's self-interest to believe that there is extra-terrestrial life if, say, one were to get paid for so believing. From an epistemic point of view, however, one should not believe that there is extra-terrestrial life, for one does not have sufficiently good reasons to believe that there is extra-terrestrial life (Hattiangadi 2010, p. 423). I will argue that, from an epistemic point of view, (OIC*) is open to counterexamples. So let me discuss the counterexample I have in mind.

The following counterexample is inspired by the film *The Next Three Days* (2010). In this movie, the life of a family of three takes a turn for the worse when the wife is accused of murder. The forensic evidence against the wife, Lara, is compelling, and it includes fingerprints, an eyewitness account, ballistics reports, DNA from blood samples, and a clear motive. Lara is convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. But her husband, John, cannot believe that she is a murderer.

Now, in the film, there are hints pointing to Lara's innocence. For the sake of argument, however, suppose that she is in fact guilty of murder. I propose, then, that this is a counterexample to (OIC*). What we have here is a scenario in which John ought to believe that Lara is guilty of murder, but he simply cannot believe that his wife is a murderer. More explicitly:

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[3] See also Chrisman (2008), Feldman (2000), and Kornblith (2001).

(NTD1) John ought to (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*).

(NTD2) John cannot (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*).

In other words, John has an all-things-considered epistemic obligation to believe that *Lara is guilty of murder* but he lacks the specific ability and opportunity to believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*. This is an instance, then, of an 'ought' that does not imply 'can'. In other words, the above counterexample is a case in which the antecedent of (OIC*) is true but the consequent is false. If this is correct, then this counterexample is an instance in which a conditional of the form (OIC*) is false. Since (OIC*) is supposed to hold for any *S* and any *p*, this counterexample shows that (OIC*) is false. John ought to believe that his wife is a murderer, and yet he cannot believe that his wife is a murderer. In other words, as an epistemic agent, John is required to believe that Lara is guilty of murder, but John lacks the specific ability and opportunity to believe that his wife is a murderer.

3. Objections

In this section, I consider possible objections to the aforementioned counterexample to (OIC*). Before I do so, a couple of clarifications are in order. First, it would be illegitimate to object to the above counterexample to (OIC*) in the following way:

(OIC*)   Necessarily, if *S* ought to (believe that *p*), then *S* can (believe that *p*).

(NTD2)   John cannot (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*).

(C2)   (Therefore) It is not the case that John ought to (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*). [i.e., (NTD1) is false]

Or, alternatively:

(OIC*)   Necessarily, if *S* ought to (believe that *p*), then *S* can (believe that *p*).

(NTD1)   John ought to (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*).

(C3)   (Therefore) John can (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*). [i.e., (NTD2) is false]

For it is precisely the first premise of these arguments, i.e., (OIC*), that I challenge in this paper. Hence, to assume (OIC*) would seem question-begging.

Second, one might think that the above counterexample begs the question against Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007), for it seems that the assumption that needs to be made in order to get the counterexample going is that John ought to believe the truth. However, one might think, this is an epistemic norm that Bykvist and Hattiangadi would reject. In reply, I would like to clarify that the above counterexample is not meant to be a counterexample to their argument. Rather, it is meant to be a counterexample to (OIC*). More importantly, I do not think we have to assume that John ought to believe the truth in order to get the counterexample off the ground. Instead, we simply need to accept that John ought to believe according to the evidence. By "evidence," I mean that which justifies belief. I take that to be rather uncontroversial. Surely, even Bykvist and Hattiangadi would agree that one ought to believe on the basis of reasons. With these

clarifications in mind, let me consider several objections to the aforementioned counterexample to (OIC*).

First, one might object to the aforementioned counterexample to (OIC*) by insisting that it is not the case that John cannot believe that Lara is guilty of murder, i.e., that (NTD2) is false. Rather, John simply cannot come to terms with this reality. In some sense, this objection complains that the above counterexample to (OIC*) is similar to another failed counterexample, which is intended to show that knowledge without belief is possible. Suppose Jane comes home after work to find out that her house has burned down. She utters the words "I don't believe it." Jane clearly knows that her house has burned down (for she sees that it has), but she does not believe it, and thus there can be knowledge without belief (Schwitzgebel 2010).

This counterexample to a justified true belief account of knowledge, however, does not show that there can be knowledge without belief, since it seems that what Jane wishes to convey by saying "I don't believe it" is not that she really does not believe what she sees with her own eyes, but rather that she finds it hard to come to terms with what she sees. Similarly, it might be argued, it is not the case that John really cannot believe that Lara is guilty of murder, but rather that he finds it hard to come to terms with this fact.

In reply, I wish to emphasize that I use the term 'belief' in the standard way as referring to the propositional attitude we have when we take something to be the case or regard it as true. So, for present purposes, to say that "S believes that p" is to say that "S says 'yes' to p" or that "S assents to p" (Moser 1989). Now, notice that Jane's case and John's case are not quite the same. For Jane, on the one hand, the proposition in question is the following:

(P1) My house has burned down.

Jane refuses to assent to (P1), or say "yes" to (P1), even though she sees that her house has burned down. There seems to be no reason to doubt Jane's sensory perceptions in this case, for there seems to be no evidence to the contrary (assuming, of course, she is not in some kind of sceptical scenario). So it seems natural to say that Jane simply finds it hard to come to terms with this misfortune. Hence, we would say that Jane refuses to assent to (P1), but we would not say that Jane cannot assent to (P1). In John's case, on the other hand, the proposition in question is the following:

(P2) Lara is guilty of murder.

The forensic evidence for (P2), although defeasible, is compelling, and it includes fingerprints, an eyewitness account, ballistics reports, DNA from blood samples, and a clear motive, but John still does not believe that (P2) is the case. Why? A natural answer, I suggest, is because he knows his wife. They have been married for several years, and based on their relationship, and everything he knows about her, John has reasons to doubt (P2). In that case, it seems more natural to say that John cannot believe (P2) than to say that John refuses to believe (P2), for he does have reasons to doubt (P2). In other words, it seems correct to say that Jane refuses to believe (P1), since she has no reasons to doubt (P1), whereas John cannot believe (P2), since John does have reasons to doubt (P2). Since John has reasons to doubt (P2), he cannot assent to (P2), or say "yes" to (P2), which means that he cannot believe (P2).

To put it another way, when faced with her burned down house, Jane's utterance "I don't believe it" is naturally construed as a refusal to face the facts (or simply finding it hard to face the facts), since sensory perception is usually a good source of information about such matters (as much as perception can be reliable) and Jane has no reason to doubt what she sees. In John's case, however, when he is faced with the forensic evidence that points to the fact that Lara is guilty of murder, John's response is effectively to say "*I know my wife and she's no murderer*." This response, I suggest, is naturally construed as expressing reasons to doubt (P2), and thus as an inability to assent to (P2), as opposed to refusal to assent to (P2).

To clarify, I am not saying that John cannot believe (P2) because the forensic evidence for (P2) is not conclusive. The forensic evidence for (P2) is compelling but still defeasible. Rather, I am saying that John cannot believe (P2) because he has reasons to doubt (P2). His reasons are based on his acquaintance with his wife and their relationship. He believes that he knows his wife. Based on their long relationship, he believes that she is incapable of committing murder. John's reason to doubt (P2), then, are weighed against the forensic evidence that supports (P2), and John is pulled in two directions, as it were. On the one hand, there is the forensic evidence for (P2). On the other hand, John has reasons to doubt (P2). That is why John cannot make up his mind. In other words, he cannot decide whether to assent to (P2) or not, which means that, in his current condition, he cannot (i.e., does not have the specific ability and opportunity) believe that (P2) is true.

These remarks point to another possible objection to the aforementioned counterexample to (OIC*). One might object that, perhaps John ought to believe that Lara is guilty of murder *objectively*, but not *subjectively*. In other words, it might be argued that we need to distinguish between an "objective" sense of 'ought' and a "subjective" sense of 'ought'. As Boghossian (2003, pp. 38-39) writes:

> The truth is what you ought to believe, whether or not you know how to go about it, and whether or not you know if you have attained it […] it is because belief is governed by this objective ought that the less controversial *subjective* oughts hold of it as well. For example: that we ought to believe that which is supported by the evidence and not believe that which has no support; that we ought not to believe p if some alternative proposition incompatible with p has a higher degree of support; that we ought to believe p only if its degree of support is high enough, given the sort of proposition that it is, and so on. All of these familiar epistemic norms are grounded in the objective norm of truth.

Accordingly, the objective/subjective distinction in this epistemic context has to do with what makes it objectively/subjectively right or wrong to believe that *p*. As Gibbard (2005, p. 340) puts it:

> We can ask what one ought to do in light of all the facts. Alternatively, we can ask what one ought to do in light of available information […] Standardly in moral theory, we distinguish what a person ought to do in the objective sense and what she ought to do in the subjective sense.

From an epistemic point of view, then, all the facts make it objectively right or wrong to believe that *p*, whereas all the available information makes it subjectively right or wrong to believe that *p*. Applied to the case at hand, it might be argued that John ought to believe (P2) *objectively*, for all

the facts are such that Lara did commit murder (as stipulated). But it is not the case, it might be argued, that John ought to believe (P2) *subjectively*, given all the available information, which includes his reasons to doubt (P2).

In reply, it seems to me that invoking the objective/subjective distinction does not undermine the intuition that John is epistemically required to believe (P2) but he does not have the specific ability and opportunity to believe that his wife is a murderer. For, as mentioned above, the forensic evidence against Lara is compelling, and it includes fingerprints, an eyewitness account, ballistics reports, DNA evidence from blood samples, and a clear motive. The forensic evidence is part of the "available information" in this case, since John has access to this information as well (for he was present at his wife's trial). Indeed, at one point in the film, the family's attorney urges John to forget that Lara is his wife for a moment and consider the forensic evidence objectively. But John still cannot believe that his wife is a murderer. Even when Lara insinuates, out of despair, that he might be wrong, John says: "I don't believe it [i.e., that Lara is a murderer] and I never will."

Again, John cannot believe (P2), not because he is stubborn or delusional, but because he has reasons to doubt (P2), which he expresses by saying "*I know my wife and she's no murderer.*" That is why John cannot decide whether to assent to (P2) or not, which means that he cannot believe that (P2) is true. If this is correct, then *objectively*

(NTD1) John ought to (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*)

because Lara did in fact commit murder. However,

(NTD2) John cannot (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*)

because the information available to John includes forensic evidence that supports (P2) and his reasons to doubt (P2). If John has reasons to doubt (P2), then he cannot assent to (P2), or say "yes" to (P2), and thus he cannot believe (i.e., he does not have the specific ability and opportunity) that (P2) is true. Furthermore, *subjectively*

(NTD1) John ought to (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*)

because the forensic evidence supports (P2). However, again

(NTD2) John cannot (believe that *Lara is guilty of murder*)

because he has reasons to doubt (P2).

Relying on the distinction between subjective and objective senses of 'ought', one might also object that the fact that John has reasons to doubt (P2), which he expresses by uttering "*I know my wife and she's no murderer,*" does not show that he ought to believe (P2) even though he cannot believe (P2). Rather, it shows that John is under no doxastic obligation to believe (P2). If John is not epistemically required to believe (P2), then (NTD1) is false, and thus this case is not a counterexample to (OIC*). According to this objection, then, it is not the case that John ought to believe (P2) subjectively.

In reply, it is important to emphasize that the available information includes not only John's reasons to doubt (P2) but also the forensic evidence in support of (P2), which includes

fingerprints, an eyewitness account, ballistics reports, DNA evidence from blood samples, and a clear motive. This forensic evidence seems to outweigh John's reasons to doubt (P2). Even if the forensic evidence does not outweigh John's reasons to doubt (P2), failure to take the forensic evidence into account would be an epistemic failure on John's part.

Furthermore, although John's reasons to doubt (P2) are based on his acquaintance and relationship with Lara, it seems plausible that John does not know Lara as well as he thinks. Perhaps she was a murderer before they got married. Perhaps a brain injury caused her to become prone to violent outbursts. Perhaps she was "pushed over the edge" by repeated insults from colleagues at work. Perhaps, as is the case in the movie, she was humiliated by her supervisor at work and apparently sought revenge. Any of these scenarios can happen without John's knowledge. So, perhaps John ought to take into consideration his reasons to doubt (P2). However, when all the available information is considered, it seems clear that it supports (P2). If so, then John ought to believe that (P2) is the case, both objectively and subjectively. But since John cannot believe that (P2) is the case, this case is a counterexample to (OIC*).

If the aforementioned considerations are correct, then they would also explain the intuition that John—*qua* epistemic agent—is doing something wrong. His failure is an epistemic failure. He ought to believe (P2), i.e., he has an all-things-considered epistemic obligation to assent to (P2). But he does not have a specific ability and opportunity to believe (P2), since he has reasons to doubt (P2). John cannot say "yes" to (P2) because he gives his reasons to doubt (P2) more weight than they warrant. This is not to say that John cannot believe (P2) because his feelings for his wife stand in the way of him assessing the forensic evidence for (P2). Clearly, John can grasp and entertain (P2). But grasping and entertaining a proposition is not the same as believing that proposition. To believe *p* is to assent to *p* or to say "yes" to *p*. One can grasp or entertain *p* without assenting or saying "yes" to *p*. For instance, one can grasp and entertain the following proposition:

(ET) There is extra-terrestrial intelligent life elsewhere in the universe,

and yet refrain from assenting to (ET) because one thinks that one is not justified in believing (ET). In that case, one would have the general ability and opportunity to assent to (ET). If one were to assent to (ET) despite the lack of justification, one would be a failure as an epistemic agent. In other words, one would do something that one ought not to do as an epistemic agent. Now suppose that a belief in (ET) is implanted in the brain of an epistemic agent. That epistemic agent, then, would not have the general ability and opportunity to refrain from assenting to (ET), despite the lack of justification, since the belief was implanted in her brain. In response to this scenario, proponents of (OIC) would rightly say that this epistemic agent does not have the epistemic obligation to refrain from assenting to (ET).

Similarly, although John has the general ability and opportunity to assent to (P2), he lacks the specific ability and opportunity to assent to (P2) because he has reasons to doubt (P2). Furthermore, although John has the specific ability and opportunity to grasp and entertain (P2), he doesn't have the specific ability and opportunity to believe (i.e., assent to or say "yes" to) (P2), since his reasons to doubt (P2), which are based on his acquaintance with Lara, carry more weight for him than they should. John can grasp and entertain (P2), just as one can grasp and entertain (ET), but he cannot assent to (P2) because he is in a state of doubt. Insofar as he gives

more weight to his reasons to doubt (P2) than to the forensic evidence in support of (P2), John is guilty of an epistemic failure.

It is important to note that, since the issue at stake is epistemic norms, the sense of 'can' in question cannot simply be the sense of general ability and opportunity. Rather, it must be 'can' in the sense of specific ability and opportunity (cf. Graham 2011, pp. 341-342). That is why an epistemic agent's general inability to believe Moorean absurdities or infinitely complex propositions is not a counterexample to (OIC*). However, even though John has the general ability and opportunity to assent to (P2), the aforementioned counterexample does count as a counterexample to (OIC*), since John has an epistemic obligation to assent to (P2), given the forensic evidence for (P2), but he lacks the specific ability and opportunity to assent to (P2), given his state of doubt about (P2).

Accordingly, suppose someone says to John: "Why can't you just accept the fact that Lara is guilty and move on with your life?" John would likely reply as follows: "I cannot do that. I cannot believe she is a murderer." Note that John does not disbelieve (P2). Rather, he cannot assent to (P2). This is a crucial difference. The difference is similar to the one between disbelieving (ET), i.e., believing that (ET) is false, and not being able to accept (ET), i.e., suspending belief about (ET). John suspends belief about (P2), which is why he cannot assent to (P2), because the forensic evidence pulls him in one direction and the subjective evidence pulls him in the opposite direction. Given his circumstances, John cannot (i.e., does not have the specific ability and opportunity) to assent to (P2) despite the fact that he is required—as an epistemic agent—to assent to (P2). If this is correct, then John's case is a case of an epistemic agent with an epistemic obligation he cannot meet, and so it is a counterexample to (OIC*).

Finally, an anonymous reviewer suggested that proponents of (OIC*) might object to the aforementioned counterexample as follows: Although John cannot F, he can F^*. For example, although John cannot turn his wife in, he can ask someone else to do it. Similarly, although John cannot believe that p, he can believe that p^*. For example, although John cannot believe that Lara is a murderer, he can believe that she sought revenge after being humiliated at work. I think that this move fails to save (OIC). According to (OIC), if S ought to F, then S can F, not F^*. That is, the relevant action is F, not F^*. For example, if John ought to turn his wife in, then, according to (OIC), he can turn his wife in. The fact that he can do something else, e.g., ask someone else to do it for him, is irrelevant, since (OIC) says that, if John ought to turn his wife in, then he can turn his wife in. Turning Lara in is not the same action as asking someone else to do it, and the relevant action is the former, not the latter. Similarly, according to (OIC*), if S ought to believe that p, then S can believe that p, not p^*. That is, the relevant belief is belief in p, not p^*. For example, if John ought to believe that Lara is a murderer, then, according to (OIC*), he can believe that Lara is a murderer. The fact that he can believe something else, e.g., that she sought revenge, is irrelevant, since (OIC*) says that, if John ought to be believe that p, then he can believe that p, not p^*. That is why the fact that S (= John) can believe p^* (= that Lara sought revenge), even if p^* is somehow related to p (= that Lara is a murderer), doesn't save OIC. The belief that Lara is a murderer is different from the belief that Lara sought revenge, and the relevant belief is the former, not the latter.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that (OIC*) is open to counterexamples. I presented a counterexample to (OIC*) and discussed several objections to it. According to this counterexample, John has an all-things-considered epistemic obligation to believe that (i.e., to assent to or say "yes" to) Lara is guilty of murder, but he lacks the specific ability and opportunity (though not the general ability and opportunity) to believe that (i.e., to assent to or say "yes" to) his wife is guilty of murder. My argument can be summed up as follows:

1. If John has reasons to doubt (P2), then John cannot assent (or say "yes") to (P2).
2. If John cannot assent (or say "yes") to (P2), then John cannot believe (P2).
3. (Therefore) If John has reasons to doubt (P2), then John cannot believe (P2). [from (1) & (2)]
4. John has reasons to doubt (P2), which he expresses by saying "*I know my wife and she's no murderer.*"
5. (Therefore) John cannot believe (P2). [from (3) & (4)]
6. John ought to believe (P2), since compelling forensic evidence supports (P2) and Lara was found guilty in a court of law.
7. (Therefore) John ought to believe (P2) but he cannot believe (P2). [from (5) & (6)]

If the aforementioned counterexample works, then it shows that it is possible that an epistemic agent ought to believe that *p*, even though that epistemic agent cannot believe that *p*. If this is correct, then (OIC*), considered from an epistemic point of view, is false, since it is supposed to hold for any *S* and any *p*.

Acknowledgments

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