



Conditional Oughts and Hypothetical Imperatives

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CONDITIONAL OUGHTS AND HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVES *

HOWEVER they differ, ought-statements like the following two seem to share an important logical property:

He ought to run before breakfast if he wants to live up to the ideal of physical fitness.

He ought to run before breakfast if he promises to.

They prescribe their objects under specified conditions; so if we speak of them as expressing "conditional oughts," they seem to let us detach oughts from their conditions on certain purely factual grounds.¹ That is, if the condition on either ought above is fulfilled, we apparently may derive an unqualified prescription of its object:

He ought to run before breakfast.

As long as the agent does accept the ideal of physical fitness, for example, it seems to follow that he ought to act on it. But in fact this inference is questionable. Some problems in deontic logic call it into question by suggesting a view of oughts as subject to temporal restrictions. In what follows, I develop that "time-bound" view (sections I-II), refine it to meet a major objection (III), and apply my results to the statements just above (IV-V).

* This paper builds on some results of my *Derived Obligation: Some Paradoxes Escaped* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1972). I owe thanks to readers of earlier versions, whose complaints forced me to clarify various points. James Goodhill and Richmond Thomason were exceptionally helpful, though I cannot say whether my revisions will satisfy them.

¹ Because the term 'obligation' does not fit all my points and examples, I shall stretch the use of 'ought' and suppose that oughts correspond to ought-statements in much the way that obligations correspond to statements of obligation. I shall also speak loosely of oughts, and of the statements that express them, as "prescribing" their objects, though obviously without meaning to limit their functions to that one.

According to the time-bound view, what lets us detach an ought from its condition is never just the tenseless fact, but only the presently unalterable fact, of that condition's fulfillment—and only while enough time remains to fulfill the ought. This is my central claim; and it rests on an understanding of ought-statements (or the most crucial subclass of ought-statements) as suited to the direction of an agent's choice. In arguing for it, in my first two sections, I expand upon suggestions scattered throughout the literature on paradoxes in deontic logic. To defend the claim, however, I need to move beyond the literature and interpret ought-statements somewhat more narrowly: they direct choice only on special grounds—on the basis of an assessment of specific acts. Then, in my last two sections, I can use my results to explain why some oughts appear to be, but never are, detachable from their conditions. Since these include oughts of the sort illustrated by the first statement above, its surface similarity to the second turns out to mask a fundamental logical difference—one which backs up our designation of some conditional oughts as “merely hypothetical.”

I

The standard system of deontic logic applies a primitive ought-operator to propositional variables, and thus yields two candidates for the representation of conditional oughts.² One of them, with a conditional object,

$$O(p \supset q)$$

is governed only by a deontic (not a factual) detachment rule: We must add to it a deontic premise, Op , to support an inference to Oq . On the other hand, a second formula, itself conditional,

$$p \supset Oq$$

lets us infer Oq from p according to modus ponens. We can thus mark off as detachable those oughts covered either by $O(p \supset q)$ where Op holds or by $p \supset Oq$ where p .

But our distinction will be headed for trouble, since either too few oughts or too many will be detachable, if we stick to the standard system's official reading of 'O'. Although it is applied without hesitation to our more intuitive ought-statements, 'O' is

² For a fuller description of the standard system, see especially Dagfinn Føllesdal and Risto Hilpinen, “Deontic Logic: An Introduction,” in Hilpinen, ed., *Deontic Logic: Introductory and Systematic Readings* (New York: Humanities, 1971), pp. 13–15. The system's two candidates for representing conditional oughts are exhibited with particular clarity in Jaakko Hintikka, “Some Main Problems of Deontic Logic,” in *ibid.*, pp. 87–90. My argument is designed to by-pass any difficulties raised by their use of material implication.

meant to be read as "it ought to be the case that." On that reading, it must apply to whatever ought *ideally* to be the case; but does it cover only ideal objects? Or does the claim that an agent ought to bring something about (a statement of "ought-to-do") imply that it ought to be the case that he does (a statement of "ought-to-be")?³ If not, and 'O' is limited to ideal objects, then we cannot detach some of the oughts most crucial to the direction of an agent's choice.

To see why, suppose I get a parking ticket; and consider the ought that would have me pay a fine if I get one. I have expressed this ambiguously, since its proper parsing seems to vary with our construal of 'ought'. Of the two suggested parsings,

O(I get a ticket \supset I pay a fine)

and

I get a ticket \supset O(I pay a fine)

only the first can be accepted with 'O' limited to ideal objects. But then our ought will be undetachable. Never mind, for the moment, what I ought to do; what ought to *be the case*, we may grant, is that I *neither* get a ticket *nor* pay a fine—even once I irrevocably have got the ticket. Ought-to-be stands firm against changes in the options open to an agent; it stays fixed on ideal objects, even once their fulfillment is out of reach. But my payment of a fine is an object whose prescription depends on my failure to fulfill some others. In general, the limitation of 'O' to ideal objects would block detachment of oughts conditional upon ought-violations.

Surely that result sits poorly with intuition. Before we pinpoint its failings, however, we ought to note that it does give us an easy way out of certain paradoxes. We could detach no conflicting oughts, for instance, from the four premises Chisholm actually states:

... (1) it ought to be that a certain man go to the assistance of his neighbors; (2) it ought to be that if he does go he tell them he is coming; (3) if he does not go then he ought not to tell them he is coming; and (4) he does not go.⁴

³ The contrast between ought-to-do and ought-to-be has been widely discussed; but for a concise summary of one author's view, see Hector-Neri Castañeda, "On the Semantics of the Ought-to-Do," in D. Davidson and G. Harman, eds., *Semantics of Natural Language* (Boston: Reidel, 1972), p. 678. I shall take these technical categories to be defined in terms of what I pick out as "official readings" of 'O'. For although these do not represent our every use of 'be' and 'do' in ordinary ought-language, they are firmly embedded in the literature, and I think we do have intuitions about their proper use.

⁴ Roderick M. Chisholm, "Contrary-to-Duty Imperatives and Deontic Logic," *Analysis* xxxiv, 2 (December 1963): 33–36, pp. 34/5.

The consequent of premise (3), his "contrary-to-duty imperative" here, is not stated in terms of "ought-to-be." Can it really conflict, then, with the result, by deontic detachment, of premises (1) and (2), which do follow the official reading of 'O'? But (3) would lose its plausibility if it were restated to produce a conflict. Even if he does not go to their assistance, it ought to be that the agent tells his neighbors he is coming—and that he goes. The closest we can get to (3) is an undetachable claim that the compound state of affairs, telling-without-going, is one that ought not to be; and that, of course, would follow from (1), far from conflicting with it and (2).

But clearly this escape from paradox succeeds only at the expense of some of the most crucial uses of 'ought'—those suited to the direction of an agent's choice, where he chooses to violate other such directions. In the ticket-case above, the only ought we could detach, with 'O' limited to ideal objects, would be the ought given by 'O(I do not pay a fine)'; and we can swallow this statement only by recognizing that it could not be meant to tell me what to do. For I ought to pay a fine if I get a ticket. This is the conditional ought with which we began; but in blocking its detachment, we seem to have lost some of its force: It may often be meant to keep me from compounding an ought-violation, and not just as a reminder that I should never have committed one in the first place.

We might try to capture that force by extending 'O' beyond ideal objects, granting that ought-to-do implies ought-to-be. But then both O(I pay a fine) and O(I do not pay a fine) would be detachable, and we would be stuck with some conflicting oughts, after all. What we want, I take it, is a system of oughts for the coherent direction of choice. Instead, then, suppose we turn to an ought-to-do reading of 'O', and be satisfied to deal with the most crucial subset of ought-statements. At least intuition would not immediately yield up the claim that I ought not to *pay* a fine, that I ought to *bring it about* that I do not. For ought-to-do need not apply to all ideal objects. Hence, our conditional ought apparently could support both of the parsings distinguished above, and we could detach oughts conditional upon actual violations of others. In that case, however, a new form of Chisholm's paradox would seem to arise; so again we would be stuck with some conflicting oughts. [Premises (1) to (3) could all be restated with 'he ought to bring it about that', to let us detach ought-to-do versions of the consequents in (2) and (3); 'he ought to bring it about that he tells them he is coming' and 'he ought to bring it about that he does not tell them'.] But the problem will vanish, according to some writers,

if we just pay serious attention to the time limits on ought-to-do.⁵ I want to see how much I can make of this view.

II

From now on, I shall restrict the class of oughts under consideration and assume that 'O' is read in ought-to-do terms. Everyday terms will do for discussion; but for an official reading we still need something a bit unnatural, in order to continue to apply 'O' to propositional variables. I shall stick to '[the agent] ought to bring it about that'. Here, "the agent" is taken to be the subject of a given set of ought-statements; and the ought-statements in a given set are taken to be made at the same time. For 'ought' lacks past and future tenses; and on this use, at any rate, it cannot be viewed as tenseless. Ought-to-do does shift with changes in the options open to an agent; so our new statements may be correct at some times and not others. Once we see which times—when oughts arise, and by when they are no longer in force—we can see how some time limits on detachable oughts would get us out of Chisholm's paradox.

We may begin by supposing that by the end of next month I shall have got my first parking ticket. From the present standpoint, we may grant that I ought to pay a fine if I get a ticket; and, by the end of next month, we shall be able to derive from this a claim that I ought to pay a fine. But now? The claim sounds wrong while it is still possible for me to avoid getting a ticket, or having any reason to pay a fine. That is what I ought to do instead; so our conditional ought cannot yet be represented by ' $p \supset Oq$ ', on anything like a standard interpretation of the formula. (It would be a different story, of course, if ' p ' were taken as past-tensed, 'O' as future-tensed, or the like.) Otherwise, we would already be able to derive a claim that I ought to pay a fine; and that move would have some odd results in general. For example, perhaps I ought to avoid getting a ticket just to keep from having to pay a fine. My money is needed elsewhere, but a ticket would "cancel out" prior oughts and commit me to paying a fine. Yet if I *already* were thus committed by what I *shall* do, then why not do it? Our very description of the case seems to lose its sense.

To avoid such results, we need to recognize some time limits on oughts, and hence on our use of the troublesome formula ' $p \supset Oq$ '. Oughts do not arise, it seems, until it is too late to keep their conditions from being fulfilled. And further, it seems that oughts

⁵ A number of papers contain elements of this view, but it is most clearly suggested in Lennart Åqvist, "Improved Formulations of Act-Utilitarianism," *Noûs*, III, 3 (September 1969): 299-323, pp. 315-321; and Richmond Thomason, "Deontic Logic as Founded on Tense Logic" (unpublished paper, 1974).

are no longer in force when it is too late to see to it that their objects are fulfilled. A point like this second one is made by a number of deontic logicians, though some fail to spell out its dependence on the switch to ought-to-do.⁶ Even once I have got a ticket, we might still grant that it ought to be the case that I did not get one; or even that I ought not to be the recipient of one, to have one, to have got one, or what you will. These are not all statements of ought-to-be, but none, I take it, is a statement of ought-to-do, as is the claim that I ought to avoid getting a ticket, to bring it about that I do not get one. But this claim would sound absurd at the time in question—or alternatively, for that matter, at a time when I am no longer able to get a ticket—when it would be wholly unsuited to the direction of an agent's choice. What would be the point in my choosing to avoid getting a ticket, once the event is past? And similarly for an earlier time when no further choices of mine would keep a patrolman from writing me a ticket. It does not seem to matter that his choices might have that effect; or (perhaps) that I still ought not to get a ticket, where 'get' just means "be given." If we really are talking about what I ought to do, then my getting a ticket would seem to be a state of affairs that I ought to avoid—but only as long as I can. And once I cannot, by the same token, it would seem quite right to direct me to pay a fine—and in general, to assign to me any oughts conditional upon my getting a ticket. For escaping their condition would no longer represent a viable alternative to bringing about their objects.

These time limits rest on a view of oughts as selecting from the options still open to an agent—his "live" options, we might say: those he really has, those not yet ruled out either by further oughts or by some unalterable facts of his case. If we take it seriously, though, this view will force us to modify the standard distinction between ' $O(p \supset q)$ ' and ' $p \supset Oq$ '. Since the first formula is equivalent to ' $O(\sim p \vee q)$ ', the oughts it covers may be taken as themselves offering an agent some options—which may or may not be live ones. In the ticket case, I am offered two: I may either avoid getting a ticket or pay a fine (as far as this conditional ought is concerned, that is); but I ought to do one or the other. Initially, though, the

⁶ One exception may be found in Wilfrid Sellars, "Reflections on Contrary-to-Duty Imperatives," *Noûs*, 1, 4 (December 1967): 304–344, pp. 334/5—if, by "circumstances that then obtain," and the like, he means those circumstances *unavoidable* at the time in question. For a clearer exception, see Thomason, *op. cit.*, pp. 7/8, where he contrasts the use of 'ought' to make a "judgment" with its use to give "practical advice," and claims that only the latter limits 'ought' to alternatives still open to an agent.

second option is ruled out by a further ought, the one that would have me avoid paying a fine, since my money is needed elsewhere. The only remaining way for me to satisfy my conditional ought is by managing not to get a ticket, then. That is the only live option it offers me; so that is what I ought to do. This gives us a version of our deontic detachment rule: Oq is derivable from $O(p \supset q)$ and Op .

But now a similar argument will let us accept a new sort of factual detachment rule: Oq will be derivable from $O(p \supset q)$ and Up , where Up asserts p 's *unalterable* truth (unalterable by the agent, I assume) at the time when these statements are made. For there will come a time when I do get a ticket; and then—or sometime before then, perhaps—it will become impossible for me to avoid getting one. So managing not to get one will be ruled out as a live option for me; and I shall be able to satisfy my conditional ought only by paying a fine. It will follow, then, that I ought to pay a fine; and our ought can be shown to be detachable without appeal to any deontic statements besides ' $O(p \supset q)$ '. Our time limits on oughts are built into the two detachment rules above, plus a modified Kantian principle according to which Op implies $\sim Up$ and $\sim U\sim p$.⁷ With them, we can now mark off detachable oughts as those covered by $O(p \supset q)$ where either Op or Up holds—at one and the same time. Only such oughts, we now insist, are actually covered by $p \supset Oq$ where p holds—some ordinary language parsings to the contrary.

Our time limits also get us out of Chisholm's paradox. No contradiction can result from a time-bound ought-to-do version of his premises, even if their conditional oughts are both detachable, as he assumes. With 'O' read as "he ought to bring it about that," and 'U' as "he cannot alter the fact that," his premises now should be understood as follows:

- (1) $O(\text{he goes to the assistance of his neighbors})$.
- (2) $O(\text{he goes to their assistance} \supset \text{he tells them he is coming})$.

⁷ Actually, the principle is somewhat stronger than this (which is all I need here); see n. 12. My inclusion of ' $\sim Up$ ' in it represents a departure from most attempts by deontic logicians to capture such a principle. Most writers favor omitting ' $\sim Up$ ' for the sake of systematic simplicity; and indeed its inclusion would force us to complicate standard deontic principles. But see Åqvist, *op. cit.*, p. 320, for an example of the odd results its omission forces them to swallow. Here, instead of arguing at length for its inclusion, since clumsier versions of my central points could be made without it, I shall just note that it would seem to be required by my reading of 'O': An agent can *bring about* some object only if *neither* it nor its negation is unavoidable.

(3) O(he does not go to their assistance \supset he does not tell them he is coming).

(4) U(he does not go to their assistance).

Premise (4) represents a necessary modification of Chisholm's argument, according to the view of oughts just sketched. Whenever it is open to the agent to bring about the compound state of affairs, going-and-telling, that is what he ought to do, in preference to bringing about any object that includes not telling. At such times, then, we can detach a prescription of the consequent in (2), but not in (3). On the other hand, once his failure to go is beyond the agent's control, he ought to focus his efforts on not telling, instead. So at such times, we can detach a prescription of the consequent in (3), but not in (2). Hence, (2) and (3) can never yield conflicting conclusions, but only conclusions restricted to different times.

There may be cases, however, where (2) and (3) never yield even that much—where (3) and (4) cannot be accepted at the same time, since going does not become impossible until after not telling does, and hence until (3)'s object does. (Normally, in fact, the agent who tells his neighbors he is coming would do so while he is still able to go.) Then (3)'s conditional ought will be undetachable, and we shall never be able to derive from it any specific contrary-to-duty imperatives. This may sound questionable, though. Indeed, some questionable points may have been blurred over in my preceding argument, where (3)'s conditional ought was treated as detachable, but only at times when (4) held. Intuition, it seems, would often prompt us to detach it before then. "All right," we might tell the agent, "you refuse to go to your neighbors' assistance. But at least you ought to avoid making things worse by telling them you are coming." We need to face some doubts about the view of oughts just sketched.

III

The time-bound view of oughts is not unique in providing us with a solution to Chisholm's paradox, but it does stand out for its appeal to common sense.⁸ It applies quite comfortably to the usual situation, as exemplified by my ticket case above, where the ought need not be fulfilled until after the fulfillment of its condition. Pre-

⁸ Compare, for example, the alternative foundations for an answer to Chisholm set up in Bas C. van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command," this JOURNAL, LXX, 1 (Jan. 11, 1973): 5-19; Åqvist, "Good Samaritans, Contrary-to-Duty Imperatives, and Epistemic Obligations," *Noûs*, 1, 4 (December 1967): 361-379; and even Bengt Hansson, "An Analysis of Some Deontic Logics," in Hilpinen, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-147, where a few of the insights of the time-bound view surface briefly on pp. 141/2, although no provision is made for detachment.

sumably, once it is too late for me to avoid getting a ticket, there will be time enough left for me to pay a fine. In Chisholm's case, by contrast, we may be confronted with an ought that can be acted upon only before its condition becomes unavoidable. At least on its most natural construal, the example demands action of an agent while he still can go to his neighbors' assistance, but simply refuses to consider that live option.⁹ Yet, if oughts are suited to the direction of an agent's choice, surely the example calls for such direction before the time-bound view of oughts would permit it. Though I mean to answer this objection in a moment, I want first to show how strong it can be made.

In everyday discussion, we often seem to depart from the time-bound view of oughts by treating as "fixed" or "given" some facts besides those which already have become unalterable. Chisholm's example can be modified to block various attempts to squeeze it into the time-bound view. For instance, it would not do just to say that our notion of unalterability should be taken to refer to the speaker (instead of the agent, as I have been assuming). That might work for the present example: what prompts us to treat as fixed the agent's failure to go to his neighbors' assistance might be our own inability to get him to go, while we could still get him to refrain from telling them he is coming—and while he, of course, could still do either one. But we might suppose that the agent and the speaker are identical, in a given case; and if it sounds odd for him to treat his own contrary-to-duty plans or intentions as fixed, we might focus on his traits or tendencies instead. "I know how lazy I am," he says. "I never shall manage to get up the energy to go to their assistance. So at least I had better restrain the urge to tell them I am coming." This sounds plausible enough.

So will a case whose contrary-to-duty imperative is unquestionably conditional upon alterable states of affairs, rather than unalterable states that refer to them—on the future upshot of intentions, tendencies, and the like, rather than those prior states themselves. Again, our case is ambiguous, as it stands: It could be that anyone reasonably expecting to fail to go to his neighbors' assistance ought to refrain from telling them he is coming, whether or not his expectation persists or is borne out. The fact that he now has the expectation would seem to be unalterable, by now; so there need not be any conflict with our time-bound view of oughts. However, we might suppose that going without telling would have particu-

⁹ For a clearer example of the same form, see Lawrence Powers, "Some Deontic Logicians," *Noûs*, 1, 4 (December 1967): 381-400, p. 396.

larly bad consequences in a given case—would be significantly worse than telling without expecting to go, though still better than failing to go. What, then, if the agent did manage, on this occasion to overcome his laziness and go, after all? “Then he really ought to tell them he is coming,” we might say, even while admitting that he has every reason to disagree with us, right now. His counterclaim, like his expectation of failure, would be reasonable but mistaken; and later he would see that we were right.

In the case where he does fail to go, then, it is his failure, and not his expectation of failure, which actually seems to give rise to a contrary-to-duty imperative. So the imperative apparently “arises from” something it precedes on the scene! For, given that the agent *will* commit a violation, surely we must accept that fact in time to prevent a worse one. “He ought to avoid telling them he is coming,” we might say; and clearly our statement might be meant to tell him what to do. At the time when it is made, we would not be satisfied to lament or censure his failure to hold his tongue, or even to predict our later willingness to prevent that failure. In many cases, later would be too late: By the time the agent cannot help but fail to go to his neighbors’ assistance, he may already have told them he was coming. We would have to act earlier to direct his choice effectively.

And so we may. But not just any bit of sound (even moral) advice, put in the form of a statement of ought-to-do, should be taken for the genuine article. For oughts seem to play a *special* practical role—one which reflects the time-bound judgment we pass on specific acts. They apply to acts whose omission would necessitate wrongdoing.¹⁰ But in Chisholm’s case, the agent cannot refrain from telling his neighbors he is coming without doing *something* wrong—either going without telling or failing to go. Telling, on the other hand, would not commit him to wrongdoing as long as he could still go. Hence, whatever reasons we may have for urging him to refrain from telling, we must reject the claim that he ought to refrain. And a different sort of case will confirm this view. Suppose I ought to give to the college of my choice. For simplicity’s sake, we may limit my choice to two: sometime during the year, I

¹⁰ Some such admission is fairly common; but see especially Alan Ross Anderson, “The Formal Analysis of Normative Systems,” in Nicholas Rescher, ed., *The Logic of Action and Decision* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University Press, 1967), pp. 170/1 and pp. 202/3, where the very definition of ‘O’ might be viewed as built upon it. Anderson does not specify any temporal references, however; and I must. When we speak of a particular act or omission as “necessitating” wrongdoing—or Anderson’s “sanction,” if you will—the time-bound view would demand that we consider it relatively to the time at which we are speaking.

ought to send money to either the college I went to or the college where I work. I need not contribute to both, though; we might even suppose that I cannot afford to. Nor are there sufficient grounds for singling out one of them as the one I ought to choose. But what if in fact I choose neither? I have always had trouble making decisions, say; and as the year ends, I still am debating. Which college, in particular, am I wrong not to give to?

I think it should be clear that the question is misguided. My failure to give to the college I went to, and my failure to give to the college where I work, amount to a violation only in combination. We could pinpoint one of them as itself wrong only if the other one became unavoidable at some time before it did. If, at year's end, I were at the college where I work, for instance, and the mails took at least a day, and there really were a precise time limit on my contribution, then, at last, my decision would have been made for me. My options would have narrowed to one, in that case; and, relative to that time, a failure to take the remaining option would necessitate wrongdoing. But otherwise (and suppose otherwise), there never will be a particular college to which I am required to give.

There may be reason, though, to *direct* me to give to a particular college, if only to keep me from stalling until too late. Someone might claim that I ought to give to the college I went to, stressing various points in its favor, just to put an end to my debate. But though his use of 'ought' would be reasonable, and meant to tell me what to do, the statement he made with it would not ring quite true. All I really *ought* to do is give to one or the other of the colleges I am affiliated with; which one is up to me. I have two options, both open at the same times; so a failure to take some one of them will not amount to an ought-violation in itself. It might be best to overlook this point, in practice, in order to get me to minimize my violations. But it does seem to be borne out by intuition.

The point might also be applied, though, to some less intuitively obvious cases. I suggested above, in setting forth the time-bound view of oughts, that conditional oughts could all be thought of as offering the agent some options. In fact, the case just sketched might have been dealt with in conditional form: if I am not going to give to the college I went to, I ought to give to the one where I work. This statement sounds plausible enough, as a scrap of ordinary language; but its 'ought' is misleadingly placed. Its object, apparently given by the phrase it precedes, really should include the condition.

Otherwise, I would lose my presumed freedom to choose which college to give to just by exercising it! If I turned out not to give to the one I went to, I would have been required, all along, to give to the one where I work. But all I am ever strictly required to do, on our assumptions, is give to one-if-not-the-other—which is to say, one-or-the-other. We may detach a more specific ought only at a time when I can no longer prevent the fulfillment of its condition, but can still see to the fulfillment of its object—which is to say, when my options have narrowed to one. But in the present case, we have been assuming that there is no such time: when one option is ruled out, so is the other. If that assumption blocks detachment, will it also apply to conditional oughts we commonly are tempted to detach from their conditions?

IV

Detachment probably will have some intuitive appeal wherever one of an agent's options, for some reason or other, seems not to be worth mentioning. Thus, if he refuses to consider some live option, we would generally ignore it in conversation (even in conversation with someone else), and sacrifice strict accuracy to economy. In Chisholm's case, where the agent is able to go to his neighbors' assistance, he has an alternative to refraining from telling them he is coming; but if he has no intention of going, we might as well shorten the claim that he ought to go or refrain from telling, or that he ought to refrain from telling given that he does not go. Why bother with an option that obviously will not be taken, or a condition that obviously will be fulfilled? The claim that he ought to refrain from telling would do just as well as a way of getting him to minimize his ought-violations. But it would not pin the blame for a violation precisely where it belongs—on an act or omission that necessitates wrongdoing. So the shorter claim, although it fulfills some chief functions of a fully acceptable ought-statement, is not itself a fully acceptable ought-statement and should not be taken at face value.

This sums up my defense of the time-bound view, applied to the case for which that view seemed dubious—where the agent really was required to take the option he refused to consider, still could take it after taking or turning down the other, but was not allowed to take it in combination with the other. I focused on that case because it seemed to give rise to paradox unless intuitively plausible ought-statements were explained away. But the explanation I arrived at will also fit cases where an agent may take either (and maybe even both) of two options open at the same times. The

college case, in my last section, was a case of this sort; but we made the assumption that both of its options were equally worth mentioning. The agent had not set her mind against some one of them; so we would not expect intuition to swallow an unqualified prescription of the other. On somewhat different assumptions, though, we would.

I want to argue that the requisite assumptions are satisfied by standard cases of the “hypothetical imperative”—oughts conditional upon an agent’s optional ends, as illustrated by my first example above, now parsed as:

O(he wants to live up to the ideal of physical fitness \supset he runs before breakfast).

These are cases to which detachment seems to apply, but never does; so they do differ logically from cases like the one illustrated by my second example above:

O(he promises to \supset he runs before breakfast).

In the second case, but not in the first, we might sometimes be able to derive an unqualified ought-statement:

O(he runs before breakfast).

Since we might readily *make* this statement in *either* case, a claim that it can be justified only in the second case at first may sound bizarre. But that claim can be shown to follow from the time-bound view of oughts set forth above.

Above, in section II, I presented a deontic detachment rule, a factual detachment rule, and a modified Kantian principle which embodied some intuitively plausible time limits on oughts. It followed from our two detachment rules, remember, that a statement of the form Oq can be derived from $O(p \supset q)$, taken as representing a conditional ought, if either Op or Up is granted. (Moreover, it seemed that any weaker factual premise than Up —anything less than that admission of p ’s *unalterable* truth at the time of utterance—would yield absurd results if taken to support detachment.) Remember, too, that our modified Kantian principle ensured us that, for any object p of an ought-statement ‘ Op ’, both $\sim Up$ and $\sim U\sim p$ hold. In effect, this imposes some further constraints on factual detachment: Oq can be derived from $O(p \supset q)$ only if $\sim Uq$ and $\sim U\sim q$ may be granted, in addition to Up .¹¹ But I hope to

¹¹ I have made it my practice in this paper to leave out technical details wherever possible. But perhaps I do need to show just how $\sim Uq$ and $\sim U\sim q$ can be derived from $O(p \supset q)$ and Up , the premises needed for application of our

show that these constraints could not all be satisfied, since q and $\sim q$ would be open only before p becomes unavoidable, on a standard interpretation of my first example.

Let me outline that interpretation in a series of three related assumptions. First, the example prescribes action in accordance with an end the agent accepts at the *time* of action. We would not require him to run before breakfast on Monday, for example, just because he accepted the ideal of physical fitness after finishing Sunday dinner. He must actually continue to accept that ideal (unless he is simply required to continue) up to any time when he is required to act on it. (Here, our example differs markedly from the promising case, where we would take it that the promise is made at some time *before* the agent is required to act on it, and that it need not be reaffirmed in any way.)

Secondly, at any time when the agent is still able to *produce* action in accordance with his end, he is also able to drop the end instead. Just before the time allotted to his run, for example, it is open to him to *stop* wanting to live up to the ideal of physical fitness, at least on a plausible construal of the sort of "wanting" that is involved here. We might prefer to speak of an ideal the agent "chooses" to live up to; and above I have referred to ends he "accepts." For although he might retain some unquenchable yearnings toward physical fitness, rationality need not require that he bring his behavior into line with these. Maybe he ought to for some special reason—say, because otherwise emotional torment would keep him from attaining the ends he does pursue by choice. But I am concerned with those latter ends—with the rational requirement that he choose the means to them. And here it does seem that the agent always can drop his end instead of acting on it. (Not so in the promising case, once again: by the time of action, it is too late to cancel the promise, or any of the background conditions on its force.)

Thirdly, the agent always *may* drop his end instead of acting on it (and here our two cases need not differ, since a promise, too, is

factual detachment rule. By substitution into our modified Kantian principle, if we also allow for the interchange of equivalent formulas within the scope of our operators, we can begin by granting that $O(p \supset q)$ implies $\sim U(\sim p \vee q)$ and $\sim U(p \ \& \ \sim q)$. We can get $\sim Uq$ from $\sim U(\sim p \vee q)$ alone. And we can get $\sim U\sim q$ from $\sim U(p \ \& \ \sim q)$ in combination with Up . Deontic detachment, on the other hand, requires a somewhat different defense, since to get $\sim U\sim q$ from $O(p \supset q)$ in combination with Op we need to appeal to a stronger version of the Kantian principle, which limits our system to oughts with compatible objects: For any p and q , we add, Op and Oq imply $\sim U(\sim p \vee \sim q)$. In the present case, we may derive $\sim U(p \ \& \ \sim q \ \vee \ \sim p)$, which reduces by equivalence-interchange to $\sim U(\sim p \vee \sim q)$, and therefore implies $\sim U\sim q$.

generally not itself required). Note that the agent is *never* required to accept the ideal of physical fitness, on our interpretation of the case—even if he accepted it before. If, for example, he had built his whole prior life around that ideal, prattled on about its importance, or the like—or, conversely, if he had shown too little firm adherence to ideals in the past—we might be tempted to demand a kind of consistency. But then his end would have ceased to be quite optional, whether or not its initial adoption was; and our prescription of action in accordance with it would not have the hypothetical status that concerns me here.

These three points combine to yield a rather unstartling claim: Whenever the agent can still produce action in accordance with his end, as required in the example, he can and may give up his end instead. In symbols: $\sim Uq \ \& \ \sim U\sim q$ implies $\sim Up$ and $\sim Op$. It is not at all unusual, though, for writers who apparently would accept this claim to miss the point I take to follow from it, and treat hypothetical imperatives, like that in my example, as governed by *modus ponens*.¹²

But how can oughts of this sort be detachable at all if my preceding claim holds? What that claim tells us is that, as long as it is open to the agent to see to the fulfillment of their objects, he also has the option of preventing the fulfillment of their conditions. So there never comes a time when his options narrow to one. He can always get out of his morning run, for example, just by abandoning the ideal that requires it. But then the requirement that he live up to that ideal differs from a requirement of promise-keeping much more radically than one might suppose.

v

It is common enough to treat hypothetical imperatives as “escapable” in some way that others are not. Before it comes time for an agent to keep his promises, he loses his chance to refrain from making them; but he may remain able to change his ends instead of having to take the means to them. In our present case, shortly be-

¹² For exceptions (but with arguments and conclusions I reject) see Sellars, “Form and Content in Ethical Theory” (Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1967), and R. M. Hare, “Wanting: Some Pitfalls,” in R. Binkley *et al.*, eds., *Agent, Action, and Reason* (Toronto: University Press, 1971). The more usual position is found in what otherwise I take to be the most penetrating article on the subject; see Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “The Hypothetical Imperative,” *Philosophical Review*, LXXXII, 4 (October 1973): 429–450. On pp. 432–438, as he answers possible objections to his central view, we find Hill in basic agreement with the interpretation of hypothetical imperatives I just outlined. But see his syllogism on pp. 431/2, or the talk, on p. 443, of hypothetical imperatives as sometimes yielding “particular prescriptions,” or “unequivocal directives,” which would “tell a particular person specifically what he ought to do.”

fore breakfast, if the agent were to renounce his ideal of physical fitness, he would not be required to take his morning run. This much amounts to the standard line; but I mean to be saying something stronger: Even if the agent does *not* renounce his ideal, he still faces no such specific requirement! All he really ought to do is renounce-or-run—or run *on condition* that he refuses to renounce his ideal. If he also refuses to run, he will be doing something wrong, of course; but we cannot point the finger at that act, in particular, as itself amounting to an ought-violation.

In the promising case, by contrast, a different temporal layout gives us a later act to fix upon as that which necessitates wrongdoing, from the standpoint of a certain time. Once the agent has promised to run before breakfast, that is, his satisfaction of the requirement to run-if-he-promises will depend entirely on whether he runs. He still will be able to avoid breaking a promise—until such time as he irrevocably refuses to run. Since that time comes after the time by which his promise is irrevocably made, we shall meanwhile be justified in requiring him specifically to run. But no such ought could ever be detached in the case where it rests on his pursuit of physical fitness. There will come a time, of course, by which he cannot avoid having *previously* accepted that ideal; but by that time, any act the ideal requires would also have become unavoidable—unless its omission has. The point is that our agent's ideal, unlike a promise, must be acted on while itself subject to change; so he never will be strictly bound by it.

Still, he does hang on to it, on our assumption. So normally there would be little practical point in offering him the option of renouncing it. In this case, the condition whose fulfillment is granted concerns our agent's acceptance of an end, a state of mind adopted and enduring by his choice. We would expect anyone genuinely in that state to resist changing it, even though he is fully able to do so. Ordinarily, then, it would be most reasonable to advise our agent simply to run, and intuition would swallow the unqualified claim that he ought to run before breakfast. But here intuition could stand some refinement. Our hypothetical imperative seems to be "iffy" in a way that distinguishes it from other conditional oughts: it is inextricably tied to its condition, even when that condition is fulfilled. Our agent always has an escape hatch, however disinclined he is to use it. But where we suppose that he *is* disinclined, we need not belabor the point in conversation.

I belabor it here because it needs to be disentangled from that weaker point we so often find in its place. What if the agent's

escape hatch eventually snapped shut, and left him with a single option, after all? I have been assuming that both options are closed off whenever one of them is; but what if I am wrong? In that case, our hypothetical imperative would eventually yield an ought as specific and binding as any—as an ought that arises from a promise, say. But the condition in our example could be modified to cover the self-imposed standards of saints and heroes, or the natural human strivings of us all; so hypothetical imperatives might be taken to yield the unqualified prescriptions of individual or social morality.¹³

If I am right, though, and providing that morality contains unqualified prescriptions, we can give new form to the traditional demand for a categorical imperative. Suppose we took some ought-statements like the following two as deontic starting points:

He ought to give up some possessions if he wants to limit himself to the barest minimum.

He ought to give up some possessions if he wants to save his starving neighbor.

With these parsed as statements of the form $O(p \supset q)$, we might assume that the agent would in fact choose to satisfy them by bringing it about that q . But no such choice could be required of him, as long as his choice of ends is not. What we need, in order to derive a statement of the form Oq , are some further ought-statements that would let us apply our deontic detachment rule, statements of the form Op :

He ought to want to limit himself to the barest minimum.

He ought to want to save his starving neighbor.

For, on our interpretation of such cases, a statement of the form Up would be acceptable only when $Uq \vee U\sim q$ is too, and hence only when Oq would have to be rejected. So our modified Kantian

¹³ In answer to the suggestion that there may be nonuniversalizable first-person oughts, oughts bearing only on oneself in virtue of one's attachment to some optional ideal, I find that people commonly appeal to hypothetical oughts. "Really," they say, "the agent simply derives the directive he acts upon from the universalizable claim that, if he wants to live up to that ideal, he ought to perform that act." This view surfaces, for example, in Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (New York: Oxford, 1965), p. 152—the source, in fact, of my fitness case.

Elsewhere it has been suggested that we might ground even common morality on hypothetical imperatives alone. We seem to find this proposal, for example, in John C. Harsanyi, "Ethics in Terms of Hypothetical Imperatives," *Mind*, n.s. LXVII, 267 (July 1958): 305–316; and, more recently, in Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *Philosophical Review*, LXXXI, 3 (July 1972): 305–316 (see especially 314/5).

principle would block any application of our factual detachment rule.

In other words, no plausible factual admissions, in combination with the conditional ought-statements above, would ever justify the detachment of their consequent:

He ought to give up some possessions.

That ought-statement would have to be rejected—not just minimized as “contingent,” “nonmoral,” or the like—if we took it to rest on an agent’s optional ends, and held to the time-bound view of oughts set forth above. Similarly for a rather less wholesome example:

He ought to serve someone his children in a stew.

On the time-bound view, this is in no danger of following from a statement we might be tempted to grant:

He ought to serve someone his children in a stew if he wants to exact on him the most terrible sort of revenge.

For this statement cannot even be said to express an ought conditional upon an agent’s *optional* ends. The end, here, is positively forbidden; but the fact that it might still be accepted need not trouble us—logically, at any rate.

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HOW TO CONFUSE COMMITMENT WITH OBLIGATION*

DEONTIC logicians commonly use terms such as ‘is committed’ and ‘is obligated’, or ‘ought’, interchangeably. Alan Ross Anderson, for example, defines the term ‘ pCq ’ (“ p commits us to q ”) as ‘ $p \supset Oq$ ’ (“ q is obligatory given p ”).¹ And the following explanatory remark is given by G. H. von Wright: “Sometimes when an agent does something he thereby becomes *committed* to doing something else. *If* he does the first he ought to do the second. Promising might be given as an example.

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¹ “On the Logic of ‘Commitment’,” *Philosophical Studies*, x, 2 (February 1959): 23–27, p. 25.