

BEYOND OUGHT-IMPLIES-CAN IMPERSONAL OBLIGATORINESS IMPLIES HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY

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YOU ARE the principal accountant of a company, and you are responsible for the filing of the company's tax return, which is due by 5 PM today. You do not need to file the return yourself: your assistant is also authorized to file it. What is obligatory for you is that the return *be filed* by 5 PM, not that *you* file it by 5 PM. At 4:55 PM, however, as your assistant is about to file the return, the computer network of your company crashes; as a result, you can no longer make it the case that the return is filed by 5 PM. If 'ought' implies 'can', then (1) it is no longer obligatory for you that the return be filed by 5 PM. But the tax regulation which requires that the return be filed by 5 PM is still in force, so one might argue that (2) it is still obligatory that the return be filed by 5 PM. Regardless of whether 2 is true, I maintain that 1 is compatible with 2: possibly, although it is not obligatory *for you* (or for anyone else) that the return be filed by 5 PM, it is *obligatory* that the return be filed by 5 PM. I defend this kind of view in section 1: I argue that some propositions are *impersonally* obligatory—namely, obligatory but not obligatory for anyone. But if it is impersonally obligatory that the return be filed by 5 PM although neither you nor anyone else can make it the case that the return is filed by 5 PM, then—as I argue in section 2—impersonal 'ought' does *not* imply 'can'. Is there a principle that holds for impersonal obligatoriness in lieu of ought-implies-can? I defend such a principle in section 3. I conclude in section 4.

1. OBLIGATORINESS: SIMPLICITER, PERSONAL, AND IMPERSONAL

What exactly is *impersonal* obligatoriness? To explain what it is, I start with some remarks about obligatoriness *simpliciter* and about *personal* obligatoriness. Unless I specify otherwise, I use 'obligatory' as shorthand for '*pro tanto* morally obligatory at the present time'.¹ Obligatoriness (i.e., obligatoriness

1 The label '*pro tanto*' is, strictly speaking, redundant: everything that is obligatory is *pro tanto* obligatory (because everything that is obligatory is either *pro tanto* obligatory or all-things-considered obligatory or both, and everything that is all-things-considered

simpliciter) is a familiar concept: to say that something is obligatory is to say that it is morally required. For example, it is obligatory (i.e., morally required) that people keep their promises. (This is not to say that keeping promises is *all-things-considered* obligatory.) *Personal* obligatoriness is also familiar: it is obligatoriness *for someone* (i.e., for some agent or for some group or plurality of agents).² For example, it is obligatory *for me* (but not *for you*) that I keep my promises: it is morally required *of me* (but not *of you*) that I keep my promises. It is convenient to take obligatoriness *simpliciter* and personal obligatoriness to apply to *propositions*, and in this paper I do so: I use (for example) ‘It is obligatory (for me) that I keep my promises’ interchangeably with ‘The proposition that I keep my promises is obligatory (for me)’. It is also convenient to talk interchangeably about personal *obligatoriness* and about personal *obligations*,

obligatory is also *pro tanto* obligatory). (By contrast, the label ‘merely *pro tanto*’—i.e., ‘*pro tanto* but not all-things-considered’—is not redundant.) Nevertheless, saying that something is *pro tanto* obligatory serves the useful function of emphasizing that it *need not* be—although it *may be*—all-things-considered obligatory (see Vranas, “‘Ought’ Implies ‘Can’ but Does Not Imply ‘Must’,” 495n15).

Although I consider only *moral* obligatoriness in this paper, my points also apply to other kinds of obligatoriness (legal, prudential, epistemic, etc.). Also, obligatoriness is relative to times: even if it is not obligatory *in the morning* that I meet you tonight, it may be obligatory *in the afternoon* that I meet you tonight (because at noon I promise to meet you tonight). Finally, given the qualifications ‘morally’ and ‘at the present time’, and given that ‘*simpliciter*’ means ‘without qualification’, ‘obligatoriness *simpliciter*’ is something of a misnomer. Nevertheless, saying that something is obligatory *simpliciter* serves the useful function of emphasizing that it *need not* be—although it *may be*—personally (alternatively, impersonally) obligatory.

- 2 Why not say that personal obligatoriness is obligatoriness for some *person* (instead of *agent*) or group or plurality of persons? Because, by an ought-implies-can principle, persons who cannot act and thus are not agents (e.g., persons who are totally paralyzed) have no obligations (i.e., nothing is obligatory for them). But then why not use ‘agential obligatoriness’ instead of ‘personal obligatoriness’? Because obligatoriness for someone is typically referred to as “personal” obligatoriness in the literature (see Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning*, 13; Hintikka, “Some Main Problems of Deontic Logic,” 60; Krogh and Herrestad, “Getting Personal,” 135; McNamara, “Agential Obligation as Non-Agential Personal Obligation Plus Agency,” 121, and “Deontic Logic”; Rönnedal, *An Introduction to Deontic Logic*, 58; cf. Ross, “The Irreducibility of Personal Obligation,” 307), whereas “agential” obligatoriness is sometimes understood in the literature as the obligatoriness of *actions* or of propositions related to actions (see McNamara, “Agential Obligation as Non-Agential Personal Obligation Plus Agency,” 121, and “Deontic Logic”; Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey,” 6–7n15; contrast Chrisman, “‘Ought’ and Control,” 436; Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 171; Price, *Contextuality in Practical Reason*, 46–47, 50). (Arguably, obligatoriness does not always apply to actions: see Broome, “Williams on Ought,” 252–54, and *Rationality through Reasoning*, 16–18; McNamara, “Agential Obligation as Non-Agential Personal Obligation Plus Agency,” 121–23; Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey,” 6; Wedgwood, “The Meaning of ‘Ought’,” 131–37; contrast Schroeder, “Ought, Agents, and Actions,” 24–33.)

and in this paper I do so: I make no distinction between (for example) the claims (i.e., propositions) that (1) it is obligatory for me *that I keep*—elliptically: *to keep*—my promises and (2) I have an unconditional obligation whose *satisfaction proposition* is the proposition that I keep my promises (or, as I say for simplicity: I have an obligation *satisfied exactly if I keep*—elliptically: an obligation *to keep*—my promises). Those who claim that there are no such entities as obligations can expunge my talk of personal obligations from this paper and replace it with talk of personal obligatoriness.³

How are obligatoriness *simpliciter* and personal obligatoriness related? First, *whatever is personally obligatory is also obligatory simpliciter*. For example, if it is obligatory for me that I join the army, then it is obligatory that I join the army: it is morally required that my obligation (to join the army) be satisfied.⁴ Second, however, I will argue that the converse fails: *it is false that whatever is obligatory*

3 See, e.g., Liberman and Schroeder, “Commitment,” 107. A *personal* obligation can be defined either as an obligation whose satisfaction proposition is *personally* obligatory or, equivalently, as an *owned* obligation (cf. Broome, “Williams on Ought,” 256–58, and *Rationality Through Reasoning*, 12–25)—i.e., an obligation that has an *owner* (defined as someone who *has* the obligation; i.e., someone for whom the satisfaction proposition of the obligation is obligatory). Similarly, an *impersonal* obligation can be defined either as an obligation whose satisfaction proposition is *impersonally* obligatory or, equivalently, as an *unowned* obligation—i.e., an obligation that has no owner. (I am talking only about *unconditional* obligations.) I will argue that (1) some propositions are impersonally obligatory, but my arguments do not establish that (2) some obligations are impersonal (i.e., unowned), so I avoid talk of impersonal obligations in this paper. Those who deny 2 (see Wringer, “Needs, Rights, and Collective Obligations,” 197, and “Global Obligations and the Agency Objection,” 219; cf. Wedgwood, “The Meaning of ‘Ought,’” 128) might also want to deny 1, but then they would need to rebut my arguments for 1.

4 See Goble, “Normative Conflicts and the Logic of ‘Ought,’” 457; cf. Williams, “Ought and Moral Obligation,” 118. (See Horty, *Agency and Deontic Logic*, 57–58 for a possible objection; for replies, see Broersen and Van der Torre, review of *Agency and Deontic Logic*, 55; Danielsson, review of *Agency and Deontic Logic*, 410; McNamara, review of *Agency and Deontic Logic*, 184.) It does not follow, and in fact it is *false*, that whatever is *all-things-considered* personally obligatory is also *all-things-considered* obligatory *simpliciter*. To see that this is false, suppose that it is obligatory *for you* that you win a certain prize (because you have promised to win, you can win, and you need the prize money to feed your child), it is also obligatory *for me* that I win that prize (because I have promised to win, I can win, and I need the prize money to feed my child), and it is impossible that we both win. Suppose also that it is morally more important that you win than that I win (because, without the prize money, your child is somewhat more likely than mine to die of starvation, and other things are equal), but it is morally more important *for me* that I win than that you win (because I have a special moral responsibility to my child but not to yours—you and your child are strangers in a distant country—and this morally outweighs for me the slightly greater need of your child), and there are no further normatively relevant considerations. Then the proposition that I win the prize is all-things-considered *personally* obligatory (it is all-things-considered obligatory *for me*) but is not all-things-considered obligatory *simpliciter* (it is instead

simpliciter is also personally obligatory. In other words, some things (i.e., propositions) are *impersonally* obligatory: they are obligatory but not obligatory for anyone.⁵ One might find this claim puzzling: In the example I just gave, if it is obligatory that I join the army, does it not follow that it is obligatory *for me* that I join the army? (How could it be obligatory without being obligatory for me?) I argue in the next note that, no, it does not follow.⁶ But even if it does follow, and thus the proposition that I join the army is (personally, hence) *not* impersonally obligatory, *other* propositions may be impersonally obligatory. In what follows, I provide three examples of such propositions.⁷

The Dog Example

For a first example of an impersonally obligatory proposition, suppose that, because the only judge in a certain town is severely allergic to dogs, a statutory regulation is enacted that prohibits dogs in the courthouse (“There shall be no dogs in the courthouse at any time”) and that instructs the mayor of the

all-things-considered obligatory that *you* win the prize). (For a related example, see Broome, “Williams on Ought,” 260–63, and *Rationality Through Reasoning*, 19–20.)

- 5 In the literature, “impersonal” obligatoriness is sometimes understood as what I call “obligatoriness *simpliciter*” (see McNamara, “Agential Obligation as Non-Agential Personal Obligation Plus Agency,” 120) and other times understood as nonagential (see note 2 above) obligatoriness *simpliciter* (see Krogh and Herrestad, “Getting Personal,” 135). I think that those uses of the term ‘impersonal’ can lead to confusion because, on those uses, whatever is personally (and nonagentially) obligatory is also impersonally obligatory. By contrast, on my use of ‘impersonal’, whatever is personally obligatory is *not* impersonally obligatory.
- 6 Suppose that you are an army recruiter, you are so persuasive that you can make it the case that I join the army, and you have promised your boss that I will join the army. Then it is obligatory *for you* that I join the army (see note 14 below for some objections), and thus it is obligatory that I join the army, but it does not follow that it is obligatory *for me* that I join the army: the fact that *you* have promised that I will join the army need not render it morally required *of me* that I join the army. (This example is inspired by Krogh and Herrestad, “Getting Personal,” 138–39; cf. Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning*, 20–21; McNamara, “Deontic Logic.”) One can similarly argue, against Chisholm’s suggestion that ‘S ought to bring it about that *p*’ can be defined as ‘It ought to be that S bring it about that *p*’, that the latter does not entail the former (“The Ethics of Requirement,” 150). On Chisholm’s suggestion and similar ones, see Almotahari and Rabern, “The Onus in ‘Ought’”; Feldman, *Doing the Best We Can*, 192–96; Forrester, *Being Good and Being Logical*, 68–73; García, “The Tunsollen, the *Seinsollen*, and the *Soseinsollen*”; Geach, “Whatever Happened to Deontic Logic?” 3–4; Harman, *Change in View*, 131–32; Hilpinen, “On the Semantics of Personal Directives,” 148–49; Horty, “Agency and Obligation,” 285–90, *Agency and Deontic Logic*, 44–58, and *Reasons as Defaults*, 68–69n4; Horty and Belnap, “The Deliberative Stit,” 619–28; Kordig, “Relativized Deontic Modalities,” 225–27; Krogh and Herrestad, “Getting Personal,” 136–45; McNamara, “Deontic Logic”; Schroeder, “Ought, Agents, and Actions,” 8–11; cf. Anderson, “Logic, Norms, and Roles,” 43; Hartmann, *Ethics*, 259–60; Meinong, *On Emotional Presentation*, 141–42.
- 7 See Krogh and Herrestad, “Getting Personal,” 145–46, for another example.

town to appoint a person solely responsible for enforcing the prohibition. Then, assuming that the regulation is not only legally but also morally binding, (1) it is obligatory that there be no dogs in the courthouse (at any time). Suppose further that the person who was solely responsible for enforcing the prohibition has died and the mayor has not yet appointed a replacement, so no one is currently responsible for enforcing the prohibition (although the regulation, and thus the prohibition, remains in force: it has not been repealed). Then, assuming that there are no further normatively relevant considerations, it is not obligatory *for anyone*—and thus it is *impersonally* obligatory—that there be no dogs in the courthouse. One might suggest that the regulation imposes obligations on everyone: (2) it is obligatory *for everyone* not to bring or keep dogs in the courthouse. One might even suggest that 1 is equivalent to 2 and, more generally, that every claim of obligatoriness *simpliciter* is equivalent to some claim (or other) of personal obligatoriness. I reply that, regardless of whether 1 entails 2, 2 does not entail 1: 2 is compatible with the claim—which is incompatible with 1—that dogs which no one brings or keeps in the courthouse (e.g., dogs that stray into the courthouse) are allowed to be in the courthouse. One might alternatively suggest that 1 is equivalent to the claim that (3) it is obligatory for everyone not to bring or keep dogs in the courthouse *and to remove* any dogs that stray into the courthouse. I reply that since (as I explained) no one is currently responsible for enforcing the prohibition against dogs in the courthouse, it is not obligatory for anyone to remove any dogs that stray into the courthouse, so 1 does not entail 3.⁸ My replies support the conclusion that some claims of obligatoriness *simpliciter* are *not* equivalent to any claims of personal obligatoriness.

Even if one is unable to find any specific fault with the dog example, one might argue that the example is somehow faulty because it is conceptually impossible (for morality, or for anything else) to require something without requiring it *of anyone*. To see that this is conceptually possible, I reply, suppose that a fire code contains a provision formulated as follows: “Every building shall have an emergency exit.” Then the fire code requires that every building have an emergency exit. But the fire code need not require *of any particular agent* (or group of agents) that *every* building have an emergency exit: maybe, through some other provision, the fire code requires of each agent only that any building owned by that agent have an emergency exit (and no agent owns every building). Or maybe the fire code does not require anything of anyone: maybe

8 Given that the regulation was enacted because the town judge is severely allergic to dogs, the regulation applies also to stray dogs (not just to pet dogs). One might ask: How could a regulation require that stray dogs behave in a certain way? I reply that the regulation does not require that: it requires that there *be* no dogs in the courthouse, not that dogs *refrain* from entering the courthouse.

the legislators who enacted the code could not agree on whether it should be required of the owners or of the builders of any given building that the building have an emergency exit and left the matter open for future legislators to decide, so the code is silent on the matter (it contains no relevant provision). In that case, the code sets a standard (and buildings that lack an emergency exit are in violation of the standard) but does not assign anyone responsibility for complying with the standard. I conclude that it is conceptually possible to require something without requiring it *of anyone* (and even without requiring *anything* of anyone). One might respond that, even if (1) this is conceptually possible for a fire code, it does not follow that (2) it is conceptually possible for morality. I agree, but the point of the fire code example is not to support 2 by using 1: I have already supported 2 by using the dog example. The point is instead to refute the general claim that it is conceptually impossible to require something without requiring it of anyone, and the fire code example does refute this general claim.

The Voting Example

For a second example of an impersonally obligatory proposition, suppose that you have an obligation (because you have promised) to vote, and I also have an obligation (because I have promised) to vote; it is possible that we both vote, and there are no further normatively relevant considerations. Then it is obligatory that we both vote (since it is morally required that we both keep our promises).⁹ But it is not obligatory *for you* that we both vote: what is obligatory for you is instead that *you* vote. Similarly, it is not obligatory *for me* that we both vote: what is obligatory for me is instead that *I* vote. And it is not obligatory *for anyone else* either that we both vote: for whom could it be obligatory, given that there are no further normatively relevant considerations? It follows that it is not obligatory *for anyone* that we both vote. In sum, it is *impersonally* obligatory (i.e., obligatory but not obligatory for anyone) that we both vote.

Objecting to my claim that it is not obligatory for anyone that we both vote, one might claim that it is obligatory *for our group* (namely, the group that consists of you and me) that we both vote. For this objection to get off the ground, it must be assumed that *any* two agents form a group; otherwise (i.e., if there are two agents who do not form a group), I can avoid the objection by assuming that you and I do not form a group. If not every group is an agent, I can assume

9 In this example, it is both obligatory that you vote (because it is obligatory for you that you vote) and obligatory that I vote (because it is obligatory for me that I vote) and it is possible that we both vote, so it is reasonable to infer that it is obligatory that we both vote (although, for reasons I will not go into, I do not accept the *general* principle that, if it is both obligatory that *p* and obligatory that *q* and it is possible that both *p* and *q*, then it is obligatory that both *p* and *q*).

that our group is not an agent, and I can reply to the objection by appealing to the claim that *an entity has an obligation only if the entity is an agent*.¹⁰ One might respond that even some groups that are not agents have obligations: an unstructured group of pedestrians who happen to witness a mugging has an obligation to stop the mugging. I have two replies. First, even if the group of pedestrians is not a *full-fledged* agent (due to its lack of structure), the group is still an agent in the relevant sense (namely, an entity that can act) *if it can act to stop the mugging (and if it cannot do so, then it has no obligation to do so)*.¹¹ Second, the group of pedestrians has an obligation to stop the mugging only if (1) it is blameworthy (in the absence of any justification or excuse) if it fails to

- 10 For (at least tentative) endorsements of (versions of) this claim, see Aas, "Distributing Collective Obligation," 14; Björnsson, "Essentially Shared Obligations," 111, 117; Collins, "Collectives' Duties and Collectivization Duties," 231, 239–40, and *Group Duties*, 35, 60–95; Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*, 148–49 (cf. "Collective Responsibility and Collective Obligation," 44–45); Lawford-Smith, "The Feasibility of Collectives' Actions," 458; Pinkert, "What We Together Can (Be Required to) Do," 188–89; Schwenkenbecher, "Joint Duties and Global Moral Obligations," 315, 317–18, and "Joint Moral Duties," 61. For (at least implicit) rejections (based on an objection that I go on to examine in the text), see Cripps, "Climate Change, Collective Harm and Legitimate Coercion"; May, "Collective Inaction and Shared Responsibility," *Sharing Responsibility*, and "Collective Inaction and Responsibility," 218; Wringer, "Global Obligations and the Agency Objection," 220–24, "From Global Collective Obligations to Institutional Obligations," 174–77, "Collective Obligations," 484–85, and "Global Obligations, Collective Capacities, and 'Ought Implies Can,'" 1530–32. For discussions, see Björnsson, "Collective Responsibility and Collective Obligations Without Collective Moral Agents," 130–34, and Schwenkenbecher, *Getting Our Act Together*, 31–36.
- 11 One might object by contesting my understanding of an agent as an entity that can act (cf. Helm, "Plural Agents," 19; List and Pettit, "Group Agency and Supervenience," 87–88; Pettit, "Responsibility Incorporated," 178; Wringer, "Global Obligations, Collective Capacities, and 'Ought Implies Can,'" 1529; contrast Aas, "Distributing Collective Obligation," 14; Bratman, *Shared Agency*, 125–26; Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 218): one might claim that, although the group of pedestrians can act, it is not an agent (but is instead a *potential* or *putative* agent: see Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*, 144–45, and "Collective Responsibility and Collective Obligation," 45; Wringer, "Global Obligations and the Agency Objection," 221–24, "From Global Collective Obligations to Institutional Obligations," 176–77, "Collective Obligations," 484–85, and "Global Obligations, Collective Capacities, and 'Ought Implies Can,'" 1531n28; cf. Björnsson, "Essentially Shared Obligations," 109; Cripps, "Climate Change, Collective Harm and Legitimate Coercion," 176–78; May, "Collective Inaction and Shared Responsibility," *Sharing Responsibility*, 109, 122, and "Collective Inaction and Responsibility," 216–18). I reply that if it is granted that *an entity has an obligation only if the entity is either an agent or a potential agent*, then I can assume that our group is not even a potential agent: we are unrelated (we are supposed to vote at different elections in different countries), and we have no way to communicate or even to become aware of each other's existence.

stop the mugging.¹² Similarly, our group has an obligation satisfied exactly if we both vote only if (2) it is blameworthy (in the absence of any justification or excuse) if we fail to both vote. But although I can grant that 1 is plausible, 2 is implausible: if we fail to both vote (i.e., you fail to vote or I fail to vote), our *group* is not blameworthy (for that failure), since our group has not promised that we will both vote—instead, *you* have promised that *you* will vote, and *I* have promised that *I* will vote. (Of course, blameworthiness can also arise from factors other than breaking promises, but I supposed that there are no further normatively relevant considerations.)¹³

In the voting example, no claim of personal obligatoriness is equivalent to the claim that (1) it is obligatory that we both vote. One might object that 1 is equivalent to the claim that (2) it is obligatory for you to vote *and* it is obligatory for me to vote. I reply that 1 does not entail 2: possibly (though not actually), 2 is false, but 1 is true because (3) it is obligatory for *you* that *I* vote and it is obligatory for *me* that *you* vote. (To see how 3 can be true, suppose that you have promised that I will vote and you can make it the case that I vote, and I have promised that you will vote and I can make it the case that you vote.)¹⁴

12 Cf. Blomberg and Petersson, “Team Reasoning and Collective Moral Obligation,” 491n14, 505–6; Darwall, “Why Obligations Can’t Be Bipolar (Directed) All the Way Down.”

13 A third possible reply is to deny that the group of pedestrians has an obligation to stop the mugging and claim instead that each pedestrian has a *collectivization* obligation: an obligation to take steps towards forming a collective agent that can stop the mugging (Collins, “Collectives’ Duties and Collectivization Duties” and *Group Duties*; cf. Held, “Can a Random Collection of Individuals Be Morally Responsible?” 480; Jansen, “A Plural Subject Approach to the Responsibilities of Groups and Institutions,” 98; Lawford-Smith, “The Feasibility of Collectives’ Actions,” 458; Schwenkenbecher, “Joint Duties and Global Moral Obligations,” 317, 321–22, “Joint Moral Duties,” 62n3, and *Getting Our Act Together*, 117–18; contrast Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 356–57n30). Note that the objection I examined in the text relies on the claim that (1) it is obligatory for *our group* that we both vote, but one might alternatively propose an objection based on the claim that (2) it is *jointly* obligatory for *you and me* that we both vote (in other words, you and I *jointly have* an obligation satisfied exactly if we both vote). The contrast between 1 and 2 relies on the distinction between *individual obligatoriness* (which relates a *single* entity—in the case of 1, a *group*—to a proposition) and *joint obligatoriness* (which relates *multiple* entities—in the case of 2, the *members* of a group—to a proposition); on this distinction, see Pinkert, “What We Together Can (Be Required to) Do,” 187–90 (see also Björnsson, “Essentially Shared Obligations”; Schwenkenbecher, “Joint Duties and Global Moral Obligations,” “Joint Moral Duties,” and *Getting Our Act Together*). I reply that 2 is false because, if we fail to both vote, we are not jointly blameworthy (for that failure), since we have not jointly promised that we will both vote.

14 I realize that promises result in obligations only under certain conditions (e.g., when the promises are not obtained by coercion or deception), but I assume throughout this paper that those conditions are met. One might object that when I promise that you will vote, I typically do not acquire an obligation satisfied exactly if you vote: I acquire instead an obligation satisfied exactly if *I make it the case* that you vote (see Broome, *Rationality*

One might alternatively object that 1 is equivalent to the claim that (4) it is obligatory *for someone* that you vote and it is obligatory *for someone* that I vote. I reply that 1 does not entail 4: possibly (though not actually), 4 is false, but 1 is true because (5) it is obligatory for you that (a) *you vote exactly if I vote* and it is obligatory for me that (b) *either I vote or you vote (or both)*. (The point is that propositions a and b jointly entail that we both vote.)¹⁵ Prompted by 5, one might suggest that a proposition *P* is impersonally obligatory only if some personally obligatory propositions jointly entail *P*. I reply that this suggestion is falsified by the dog example (in which the proposition that there are no dogs in the courthouse is impersonally obligatory but is not entailed by any personally obligatory propositions); see also the example that follows.

The Poisoning Example

For a third example of an impersonally obligatory proposition, suppose that your daughter has been given a deadly poison. There is only one antidote, available only at the National Antidote Center. You email the director of the center, and you receive in reply the following email, which contains only true claims:

I am sorry to hear that your daughter has been poisoned. There is another person (to whom I am separately sending an identical email) whose daughter has been given the same poison, but there is only one dose of the antidote. I am asking you, and I am also asking that other person, to pay me a bribe by sending in the next hour ten thousand dollars to my bank account; my account details are attached. If only one of you pays, then I will give the antidote to the daughter of whoever pays;

Through Reasoning, 17). In reply, I can grant that this is typically so, but I assume that the specific wording of my promise makes it clear that my promise counts as kept exactly if you vote, even I do not make it the case that you vote. One might also object that I have no obligation satisfied exactly if *you* do something (e.g., you vote) because (1) my obligations are obligations for *me* to do (or to refrain from doing) something: they are satisfied exactly if *I* do (or I refrain from doing) something (see Schwenkenbecher, "Joint Duties and Global Moral Obligations," 320). I reply that 1 is false: if I promise my mother that my son will call her today (not that I will *make* him call her, although I *can* make him call her) and, a couple of seconds after I promise, my son calls my mother on his own (without any prompting from me, and being unaware of my promise), then the obligation that I acquire when I promise is satisfied although I do not do (and I do not refrain from doing) anything (see McNamara, "Agential Obligation as Non-Agential Personal Obligation Plus Agency," 121; cf. Broome, "Williams on *Ought*," 254, and *Rationality Through Reasoning*, 16–18; Krogh and Herrestad, "Getting Personal," 151; Vranas, "I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey," 6). One might object that there are things I *fail* to do, but I reply that it does not follow that I *refrain* from doing them: to refrain from doing something is to *make it the case* that one fails to do it (see Belnap et al., *Facing the Future*, 40–45).

15 See Goble, "Normative Conflicts and the Logic of 'Ought,'" 481n13, for a similar example.

but if both of you pay or neither of you pays, then I will randomly choose one of the two girls and give her the antidote. The antidote is perfectly safe and effective, but the girl who does not get it will be dead tomorrow. Don't try to change my mind: you will be unable to communicate with me in the next hour because I have taken a drug that in a few seconds will render me unconscious for a bit more than an hour.

Suppose that (unbeknownst to you) I am the other person to whom this email refers, but there cannot be any communication between you and me in the next hour. Suppose also that each of us can easily afford to pay ten thousand dollars in the next hour, and there are no further normatively relevant considerations. In this example, it is (*pro tanto*) obligatory that *we both fail to pay* (since it is morally required that people fail to bribe public officials). Moreover, the case in which we both fail to pay (and in which the girl who gets the antidote is chosen randomly) is overall morally better than the alternative cases: (1) it is better than the case in which we both pay because in that case two bribes are paid (and the girl who gets the antidote is again chosen randomly), and (2) it is better than the case in which only one of us pays because in that case a bribe is paid and (unfairly) determines which girl gets the antidote.¹⁶ Since it is both *pro tanto* obligatory and overall morally best that we both fail to pay,

16 In all cases, exactly one girl gets the antidote, and (in the absence of further normatively relevant considerations) it does not matter morally *which* girl gets it; but it does matter morally *how* the girl who gets it is chosen. One might argue that the case in which we both pay is overall morally better than the case in which we both fail to pay: in both cases, the girl who gets the antidote is chosen randomly, but in the case in which we both pay, you satisfy your stronger obligation to promote your daughter's survival (because, as I explain shortly in the text, if you pay, then your daughter has a significantly higher chance of getting the antidote than if you do not pay) and you violate your weaker obligation not to bribe a public official (and I also do so), whereas in the case in which we both fail to pay, you satisfy your weaker obligation not to bribe a public official and you violate your stronger obligation to promote your daughter's survival (and I also do so). In reply, I submit that the poisoning example shows that *a case in which people satisfy their weaker obligations can be overall morally better than a case in which people satisfy their stronger obligations*; but if one disagrees, I can show this by modifying the example as follows. Suppose that there are exactly two doses of the antidote, and the director writes: "If only one of you pays, then I will keep one dose, and I will give the other dose to the daughter of whoever pays; if both of you pay, then I will keep one dose, and I will randomly choose one of the two girls and give her the other dose; and if neither of you pays, then I will randomly choose one of the two girls and give her one dose, and depending on the outcome of a coin toss I will either keep the other dose or give it to the other girl." In this modified example, the fact that if we both fail to pay there is a significant chance that an extra girl gets the antidote outweighs the fact that if we both pay we satisfy our stronger obligations, so the case in which we both fail to pay is overall morally better than the case in which we both pay. For simplicity, I stick to the unmodified poisoning example in the text.

it is *all-things-considered* obligatory that we both fail to pay. Nevertheless, it is not obligatory *for anyone* that we both fail to pay. To start with, it is not obligatory *for you* that we both fail to pay: it is instead (*pro tanto*) obligatory for you that *you* fail to pay. And it is also (all-things-considered) obligatory for you that *you pay*: if I pay, then your daughter has a 50 percent chance of getting the antidote if you pay but has no chance if you do not pay, and if I do not pay, then your daughter has a 100 percent chance of getting the antidote if you pay but has only a 50 percent chance if you do not pay. (If you pay, you violate your obligation not to bribe a public official, but this is outweighed by the fact that you increase your daughter's chance of surviving. Admittedly, you reduce *my* daughter's chance of surviving, but this is outweighed by the fact that you have a special moral responsibility to *your* daughter.) Similarly, it is not obligatory *for me* that we both fail to pay: it is instead (*pro tanto*) obligatory for me that *I* fail to pay, and it is also (all-things-considered) obligatory for me that *I pay*. Finally, it is not obligatory *for anyone else* that we both fail to pay: it is not obligatory *for our group* (see my discussion of the voting example), and—by an ought-implies-can principle—it is not obligatory *for the director*, since the director is unconscious and thus cannot make it the case that we both fail to pay.¹⁷ In sum, it is impersonally obligatory that we both fail to pay. Moreover, the proposition *P* that we both fail to pay is *all-things-considered impersonally obligatory* (i.e., it is both all-things-considered obligatory and impersonally obligatory), but it is not the case that some all-things-considered personally obligatory propositions jointly entail *P*.¹⁸

- 17 My claim that *now* (shortly after the director became unconscious) it is not obligatory for the director that we both fail to pay is compatible with the claims that (1) *before* the director became unconscious, it *was* obligatory for the director that we both fail to pay, and that (2) *after* the director becomes conscious again, it *will* be obligatory for the director to return any bribes paid by you or me. (By assumption, which girl gets the antidote depends on who pays, regardless of whether any paid bribes are returned.)
- 18 I define an *all-things-considered personally obligatory* proposition as a proposition that is all-things-considered obligatory for someone (*Definition 1*). However, by analogy with my definition of an all-things-considered impersonally obligatory proposition as a proposition that is both all-things-considered obligatory and impersonally obligatory (*Definition 2*), one might propose defining an all-things-considered personally obligatory proposition as a proposition that is both all-things-considered obligatory and personally obligatory (*Definition 1**). Also, by analogy with my definition of an impersonally obligatory proposition as a proposition that is obligatory but not obligatory for anyone, one might propose defining an all-things-considered impersonally obligatory proposition as a proposition that is all-things-considered obligatory but not all-things-considered obligatory for anyone (*Definition 2**). To reject both *Definition 1** and *Definition 2**, I argue below that some proposition *P* is (1) all-things-considered obligatory, (2) personally obligatory, and (3) not all-things-considered obligatory for anyone. Then *P* is (by 1 and

The poisoning example is a moral analog of the Prisoner's Dilemma. A common view is that the Prisoner's Dilemma "illustrates a conflict between individual and group rationality."¹⁹ I suggest instead that the Prisoner's Dilemma illustrates a conflict between individual (or *personal*) and *impersonal* rationality: it is sometimes (impersonally) rationally required that people fail to do what is rationally required of them. Similarly, the poisoning example illustrates a conflict between personal and impersonal obligatoriness: it is sometimes all-things-considered impersonally obligatory (and thus also all-things-considered obligatory *simpliciter*) that people fail to do what is all-things-considered obligatory for them. If so, then impersonal obligatoriness is irreducible to personal obligatoriness (and so is also obligatoriness *simpliciter*). One might object that in the poisoning example it is overall morally best but it is not obligatory (and thus it is not impersonally obligatory) that we both fail to pay, so the example illustrates only a conflict between what is all-things-considered personally obligatory and what is overall morally best.²⁰ In reply, compare the poisoning example with

2) all-things-considered *personally* obligatory according to Definition 1* but is (3) *not* all-things-considered obligatory for *anyone* (and this is undesirable—and precluded by Definition 1). Moreover, *P* is (by 1 and 3) all-things-considered *impersonally* obligatory according to Definition 2* but is (2) *personally* obligatory (and this is undesirable). To argue that there is such a proposition *P*, modify the poisoning example by supposing that a teenage hacker who reads the director's emails can make it the case that we both fail to pay (by remotely shutting down our internet-connected devices) and promises a bystander that we will both fail to pay, but then the hacker's father orders the hacker to disregard that promise. Then the proposition *P* that we both fail to pay is (1) all-things-considered obligatory and (2) personally obligatory (it is obligatory for the hacker, given the hacker's promise to the bystander), but is (3) not all-things-considered obligatory for anyone (it is not all-things-considered obligatory for the hacker, assuming that the order given by the hacker's father outweighs the hacker's promise to the bystander).

- 19 Kuhn, "Prisoner's Dilemma"; cf. Blomberg and Petersson, "Team Reasoning and Collective Moral Obligation." See also Campbell, "Background for the Uninitiated."
- 20 One might argue that, although it is natural to say "It ought to be the case that we both fail to pay," this sentence does not express a deontic claim (of obligatoriness): it expresses instead the evaluative claim that it is overall morally best that we both fail to pay. In a similar vein, James Forrester argues that "'There should be no more war' places no obvious obligations on anyone to act in any way; it says little more than that a world without war would be a better world than a world with war" (*Being Good and Being Logical*, 56–57; cf. Smith, "Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts," 342; Tomalty, "The Force of the Claimability Objection to the Human Right to Subsistence," 5), and many other authors make similar points about "ought to be" sentences (see Castañeda, "On the Semantics of the Ought-to-Do," 450; Finlay and Snedegar, "One Ought Too Many," 104; Guendling, "Modal Verbs and the Grading of Obligations," 122–23; Haji, *Deontic Morality and Control*, 15; Hansson, "The Varieties of Permission," 197; Harman, "Relativistic Ethics," 113, 118; Humberstone, "Two Sorts of 'Ought's,'" 10; Mason, "Consequentialism and the 'Ought Implies Can' Principle," 319; McConnell, "'Ought' Implies 'Can' and the Scope

the following modification of it: instead of asking each of us to pay a bribe, the director asks each of us to donate in the next hour ten thousand dollars to what we both know (but the director does not know) to be a wasteful charity that squanders most donations. There is a significant difference between the unmodified poisoning example and the modified one: bribing a public official violates an obligation, but donating to (what one knows to be) a wasteful charity violates no obligation (although it is not morally best). As a result, satisfying our obligations not to bribe a public official requires that we both fail to pay (i.e., fail to bribe) in the unmodified example, but nothing similarly requires that we both fail to pay (i.e., fail to donate) in the modified example. I capture this difference by saying that in the unmodified example it is obligatory (i.e., morally required) that we both fail to pay whereas in the modified example it is not; but the objection fails to capture the difference because it leads to saying instead that in both examples it is overall morally best but not obligatory that we both fail to pay.²¹

Does the concept of impersonal obligatoriness play any significant roles in moral reasoning and in moral theorizing? To see that it does, consider again the dog, voting, and poisoning examples. In the dog example, moral reasoners who know that it is impersonally obligatory that there be no dogs in the courthouse

of Moral Requirements,” 438; Robinson, “Ought and Ought Not,” 195; Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 33; van Fraassen, “Values and the Heart’s Command,” 6). I reply that I am not claiming that every “ought to be” sentence expresses a deontic claim (of obligatoriness) rather than an evaluative claim. But some “ought to be” sentences do so: the sentence “It ought to be the case that we both vote” can express the proposition that (1) it is obligatory that we both vote. I agree with Forrester that 1 “places no obvious obligations on anyone to act in any way”: as I argued, 1 does not entail that it is obligatory for me to vote or that it is obligatory for you to vote. But it does not follow that 1 is not a deontic claim: the reason why it is obligatory that we both vote is not that this would make the world a better place (in fact, the opposite may be the case) but is instead that each of us has promised (and for this reason has an obligation) to vote, and this suggests that 1 is a deontic claim.

- 21 If one accepts the consequentialist view that something is all-things-considered obligatory exactly if it is overall morally best, then one should say (contrary to what I said) that, even in the modified example, it is all-things-considered obligatory (since it is overall morally best) that we both fail to pay. I reply first that the objection I addressed in the text does not even get off the ground if one accepts the consequentialist view because then one may not say that in the unmodified example it is overall morally best *but not obligatory* that we both fail to pay. Moreover, the fact that the consequentialist view fails to capture the difference I noted in the text is a reason to reject the consequentialist view. I propose instead that, in the modified example, it is all-things-considered obligatory that either we both fail to pay or we both pay because these are the only two cases in which the girl who gets the antidote is randomly and thus fairly chosen (although the case in which we both fail to pay is morally better than the case in which we both pay). (In my discussion of the unmodified example, I implicitly appealed to the claim that if something is *both pro tanto* obligatory and overall morally best, then it is all-things-considered obligatory; but this claim does not entail the consequentialist view.)

may infer that they have a *reason* (though not an obligation) to remove any dogs that stray into the courthouse (assuming that they can do so) and may also infer that they have a reason (and arguably even an *obligation*) not to bring or keep dogs in the courthouse. More generally, moral reasoners who know that it is impersonally obligatory that p may infer that they have a reason (and in some cases even an obligation) to contribute to its becoming the case that p (assuming that they can do so)—but they may infer this only under certain conditions, as I argue next, and one task for moral theorizers is to identify those conditions. To see that some conditions are needed, suppose that in the voting example your father, who knows that it is impersonally obligatory that we both vote, can contribute to its becoming the case that we both vote by convincing you to vote, but also knows that, if he does so, then you will vote for a racist candidate that he opposes. Then your father need not have any reason (and may not infer that he has a reason) to convince you to vote. Finally, in the poisoning example, moral reasoners who realize that there is a conflict between personal and impersonal obligatoriness may infer that they have a reason to avoid (to the extent that they can) situations that lead to such conflicts. Moral theorizers, on the other hand, have the task of figuring out whether such conflicts are problematic for morality. These issues deserve further investigation, but it is not a goal of this paper to provide a complete theory of impersonal obligatoriness.²²

22. One might think that the distinction between personal obligatoriness and obligatoriness *simpliciter* amounts to a *de re/de dicto* distinction: according to Forrester (*Being Good and Being Logical*, 65–66), “the ‘ought to be’ is a *de dicto* operator, while the ‘ought to do’ is *de re*,” because (1) “the ‘ought to be’ operator ... operates on entire propositions” but “the ‘ought to do’ operator ... operates on predicates only,” and (2) “It ought to be that George takes out the garbage” might be true even if there is no such person as George, but “George ought to take out the garbage” “cannot possibly be true unless there is such a person as George.” I reply first that the distinction between personal obligatoriness and obligatoriness *simpliciter* does not correspond exactly to the distinction between ‘ought to do’ and ‘ought to be’ (cf. Humberstone, “Two Kinds of Agent-Relativity,” 146): only some claims of personal obligatoriness (namely, those that are also claims of agential obligatoriness: see note 2 above) are “ought to do” claims, and only some “ought to be” claims (namely, those that are deontic rather than evaluative: see note 20 above) are claims of obligatoriness *simpliciter*. In what follows, I address analogs of 1 and 2 that are about obligatoriness *simpliciter* instead of ‘ought to be’ and about personal obligatoriness instead of ‘ought to do’. Let ‘ Tg ’ stand for “George takes out the garbage,” and introduce the operators ‘ O ’ (“it is obligatory that”) and ‘ O_g ’ (“it is obligatory for George that”). (1’) Both operators can prefix either closed formulas (OTg : It is obligatory that George take out the garbage (*de dicto simpliciter*); O_gTg : It is obligatory for George that he take out the garbage (personal *de dicto*)) or open formulas ($\lambda x(OTx)g$: George is such that it is obligatory that he take out the garbage (*de re simpliciter*); $\lambda x(O_gTx)g$: George is such that it is obligatory for him that he take out the garbage (personal *de re*)). (‘ λ ’ is the predicate abstraction quantifier.) (2’) Even if the *de dicto simpliciter* claim above does not entail that George exists but the

2. IMPERSONAL 'OUGHT' DOES NOT IMPLY 'CAN'

Consider the following ought-implies-can principle:

OIC: If at a given time it is obligatory for an agent that p , then at that time the agent can (i.e., has both the ability and the opportunity to) make it the case that p .

This principle is formulated in terms of obligatoriness *for an agent*.²³ In this section, I argue that no version of this principle holds for *impersonal* obligatoriness. Note first that the following sentence does *not* express a version of the above principle: "If at a given time it is impersonally obligatory that p , then at that time the agent can make it the case that p ." This sentence expresses no principle at all: Who is "the agent"? To avoid this problem, one might propose replacing 'the agent' with 'some agents' (understood as referring to a single agent, a group of agents, or a plurality of agents). This proposal yields the following principle:

IOIC₁: If at a given time it is impersonally obligatory that p , then at that time some agents can (i.e., have both the ability and the opportunity to) make it the case that p .

personal *de re* claim does entail that George exists, the fact that there are also personal *de dicto* and *de re simpliciter* claims shows that the distinction between personal obligatoriness and obligatoriness *simpliciter* cuts across the *de re/de dicto* distinction. (Strictly speaking, if g is a constant that denotes George at every world, then the personal *de re* and *de re simpliciter* claims are logically equivalent to the corresponding *de dicto* claims; to avoid this, I could use a *descriptor* instead of g (Priest, *An Introduction to Non-Classical Logic*, 355): a descriptor need not denote the same object at every world.)

23 Several remarks are in order. First, strictly speaking, my formulation of OIC should be prefixed with 'By virtue of conceptual necessity' (and similarly for the other principles that I consider later). Second, like (personal) obligatoriness (cf. note 1 above), ability (plus opportunity) is relative to times: even if *in the morning* you can run in tomorrow's marathon, maybe *in the afternoon* you cannot (because at noon you break your leg). Third, many ought-implies-can principles have been formulated in the literature (see Vranas, "I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey," 3n3, for references), but here I consider OIC because I take something like OIC to be the most plausible ought-implies-can principle for (unconditional) personal obligatoriness and thus the best starting point in the quest for an ought-implies-can principle for (unconditional) impersonal obligatoriness. Fourth, in previous work (see Vranas, "I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey," 30), I formulated (and I argued that it is better to formulate) ought-implies-can principles in terms of personal *obligations* instead of personal *obligatoriness*. Nevertheless, here I formulate OIC in terms of personal *obligatoriness* because I plan to distinguish OIC from *impersonal* versions of it: I formulate those versions in terms of impersonal *obligatoriness* because (as I said in note 3 above) I avoid talk of impersonal *obligations*.

This principle might seem plausible: if it is impersonally obligatory that there be no dogs in the courthouse, then arguably some agents can make it the case that there are no dogs in the courthouse. I argue next, however, that IOIC₁ is false. Suppose that (1) it is obligatory *for you* that you win a gold medal in a given race (because you have promised to win and you can win), (2) it is also obligatory *for me* that I win a gold medal in that race (because I have promised to win and I can win), (3) it is possible that we *both* win a gold medal (because it is possible that we tie for first place), (4) no one can make it the case that we tie for first place (in particular, we cannot coordinate our actions before or during the race so as to finish at the same time), and (5) there are no further normatively relevant considerations. Then (by 1, 2, 3, and 5) it is impersonally obligatory that we both win a gold medal (as one can see by reasoning as in the voting example of section 1), but (by 4) no agents can make it the case that we both win a gold medal; so IOIC₁ is false. One might respond that, although we cannot *make it the case* that we both win a gold medal, in a sense we *can* both win—or it is *feasible* for us that we both win—a gold medal: we can make it the case that we both try to win, and if we both tried to win it *might* be the case that we tie for first place. More generally, say that at a given time it is *feasible* for some given agents that *p* exactly if there is something that at that time those agents can make the case such that, if they were to make it the case, then it *might* be the case that *p*. (It follows that, if at a given time some given agents can make it the case that *p*, then at that time it is feasible for those agents that *p*.) One might then propose the following principle, which is *not* refuted by the race example:

IOIC₂: If at a given time it is impersonally obligatory that *p*, then at that time it is feasible for some agents that *p*.

This is a very weak principle because the above concept of feasibility is very weak (and is weaker than most feasibility concepts in the literature).²⁴ For example, it is feasible for you that you win ten lotteries because, if you bought tickets for ten lotteries (which I assume you can do), it *might* be the case that you win all ten lotteries. Nevertheless, I argue next that even this very weak principle is false. Modify the race example by supposing that if we both entered the race, then either I would kill you or you would kill me (we would fight a duel to the death, and each of us can win such a duel). In this modified example, it is again impersonally obligatory that we both win a gold medal. But it is not feasible for any agents that we both win a gold medal because, no matter

24 Cf. Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 243–48; Southwood, “Does ‘Ought’ Imply ‘Feasible?’” 11–17, and “The Feasibility Issue”; Wiens, “Political Ideals and the Feasibility Frontier.”

what any agents were to make the case (among the things that they can make the case), it *would not* be the case (and thus it is false that it *might* be the case) that we both win a gold medal: either we would not both enter the race and then we would not both win (assuming that entering the race is necessary for winning), or we would both enter the race and then again we would not both win (since either I would kill you or you would kill me). One might object that if we both entered the race but neither of us killed the other, then it might be the case that we both win. I agree, but I reply that, given that if we both entered the race either I would kill you or you would kill me, I assume that no agents can make it the case that we both enter the race but neither of us kills the other. I conclude that IOIC₂ is false.²⁵

The above counterexample to IOIC₂ relies on (the impersonal obligatoriness of) the proposition that we both win a gold medal. This proposition does not entail that we *make it the case* that we both win a gold medal (since this proposition does not preclude that we both win by coincidence, that we just happen to tie for first place), and thus is not an *agential* proposition, defined as a proposition to the effect that some agents make something the case.²⁶ To avoid the counterexample, one might propose restricting IOIC₂ to agential propositions. This proposal yields the following principle:

IOIC₃: If at a given time it is impersonally obligatory that some given agents *make it the case* that *p*, then at that time it is feasible for some agents that *p*.

I argue next, however, that this principle is also false. Suppose that you have decided to compete in two marathons that are scheduled on the same day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Suppose also that (1) it is obligatory *for my uncle*—and thus it is obligatory—that you finish the *first* marathon (because my uncle has promised that you will do so, and he can make it the case that

25 Given how I defined feasibility, it is feasible for us that we both win a gold medal exactly if there is something *we* can make the case such that, if we were to make it the case, then it might be the case that we both win a gold medal. To avoid my counterexample to IOIC₂, one might propose to define instead feasibility so that it is feasible for us that we both win a gold medal exactly if there is something *you* can make the case and there is something *I* can make the case such that, if you were to make the former the case and I were to make the latter the case, then it *might* be the case that we both win a gold medal. On the alternative definition of feasibility, it *is* feasible for us that we both win a gold medal: you can win and I can win, and if you were to win and I were to win, then (it would, and thus) it might be the case that we both win. In reply, I reject the alternative definition because it has the undesirable consequence that even if (1) you *would not* win if I were to win and (2) I *would not* win if you were to win, it is feasible for us that we both win.

26 Cf. note 2 above and the “stit paraphrase thesis” in Belnap et al., *Facing the Future*, 7–8.

you do so: he can give you a performance-enhancing pill), (2) it is (similarly) obligatory *for your aunt*—and thus it is obligatory—that you finish the *second* marathon, (3) it is possible that you finish both marathons, (4) no one can make it the case that you finish both marathons, because if you finished the first marathon then you would be so exhausted that (even if you took a pill) you *would not* finish the second marathon, and (5) there are no further normatively relevant considerations. Then (by 1, 2, 3, and 5) it is impersonally obligatory that (you make it the case that) you finish both marathons (as one can see by reasoning as in the voting example of section 1), but (by 4) it is not feasible for any agents that you finish both marathons: no matter what any agents were to make the case (among the things that they can make the case), it *would not* be the case (and thus it is false that it *might* be the case) that you finish both marathons. I conclude that IOIC₃ is false. (In this counterexample to IOIC₃, I can assume that it is due to “human nature”—whatever this means—that you would not finish the second marathon if you finished the first, so one cannot avoid the counterexample by redefining feasibility as compatibility with human nature.)²⁷

To avoid my counterexamples to IOIC₂ and IOIC₃, one might retreat to a concept of feasibility even weaker than the very weak concept I used above: one might define feasibility as *historical possibility*—namely, as compatibility with all historical facts (and maybe also the laws of nature: see note 29 below). In fact, in the next section I defend the principle that impersonal ‘ought’ implies ‘historically possible’. (Although whatever is historically possible in a sense *can* happen, this ‘can’ is defined without reference to the abilities of any agents; so I take the above principle to be a replacement for OIC rather than a version of OIC, and I stand by my claim that no version of OIC holds for impersonal obligatoriness.) One might claim that the above principle is too weak to be worth defending: Is it not obvious that whatever is (impersonally) obligatory is compatible with the historical facts? For example, how could the (historically impossible) proposition that the sun did *not* rise yesterday be obligatory (today)? I have three points in reply. First, it is not so obvious that *other* historically impossible propositions—for example, the proposition that people always keep their promises (which is historically impossible because some promises have been broken)—fail to be obligatory (today). Second, even if one finds a claim obvious, it is good to have an *argument* for the claim: after all, many apparently obvious claims (e.g., the claim that simultaneity is nonrelative) have turned out to be false. Third, my arguments in this section suggest that no significantly stronger replacement for OIC is defensible. Moreover, in the next section I also defend the following

27 See Estlund, “Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy”; and Southwood, “The Relevance of Human Nature.”

replacement for the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can avoid’: if a proposition is obligatory at a given time, then its *negation* is historically possible at that time. This principle contradicts the view of several authors that every logically necessary proposition is obligatory (see note 37 below).

3. IMPERSONAL ‘OUGHT’ IMPLIES ‘HISTORICALLY CONTINGENT’

To define *historical contingency*, define first the *history* of the world up to and including a given time as the conjunction of all true propositions that are not about any later time. Say that a proposition is *historically necessary* (in other words, is *settled*) at a given time exactly if it is logically entailed by the history of the world up to and including that time.²⁸ For example, the proposition that the sun rose yesterday is historically necessary today. Say also that a proposition is *historically impossible* at a given time exactly if its negation is historically necessary at that time. For example, the proposition that the sun did not rise yesterday is historically impossible today. Finally, say that a proposition is *historically contingent* at a given time exactly if it is neither historically necessary nor historically impossible at that time (equivalently, exactly if both it and its negation are *historically possible*—i.e., not historically impossible—at that time). For example, the proposition that the sun will rise tomorrow is historically contingent today (in other words, today it is historically contingent that the sun will rise tomorrow).²⁹

28 See Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey,” 5n8. Cf. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 7; Thomason, “Indeterminist Time and Truth-Value Gaps”; van Fraassen, “A Temporal Framework for Conditionals and Chance,” 94.

29 This is so even if the history of the world up to and including today *in conjunction with the laws of nature* logically entails that the sun will rise tomorrow. The laws of nature are not part of (more precisely, are not logically entailed by) the history of the world (up to and including today) because they are about *all* times, including *future* ones. But then, one might object, the principle that (1) impersonal ‘ought’ implies ‘historically contingent’ is too weak because it does not preclude nomologically impossible propositions that are historically contingent (e.g., the proposition that you will run faster than light) from being obligatory. I reply that the argument I will give for 1 can be easily modified (by replacing the history of the world with the conjunction of the laws of nature) to defend the principle that (2) impersonal ‘ought’ implies ‘nomologically contingent’. So I can defend (and I accept) the conjunction of 1 with 2—namely, the principle that (3) impersonal ‘ought’ implies ‘both historically contingent and nomologically contingent’—although for simplicity I consider only 1 in the text. (An alternative possible reply to the above objection is to define the *history** of the world up to and including a given time as the conjunction of the *laws of nature* with all true propositions that are not about any later time (cf. Lange, *Laws and Lawmakers*, 211n48) and to defend the principle—which is stronger than 3—that (4) impersonal ‘ought’ implies ‘historically* contingent’. I do not adopt this reply because my argument for 1—in particular, its premise P₁ (see below in the text)—cannot be modified to defend 4. I take this to be a good thing because 4 has, for example, the controversial

Given this terminology, I can formulate a principle that (I submit) holds for impersonal obligatoriness in lieu of ought-implies-can (although it *also* holds for personal obligatoriness, so I formulate it in terms of obligatoriness *simpliciter*)—namely, the principle that *obligatoriness implies historical contingency*:

OIHC: If at a given time it is obligatory that p , then at that time it is historically contingent that p . More precisely: *by virtue of conceptual necessity, every proposition that is obligatory at a given time is historically contingent (i.e., neither historically necessary nor historically impossible) at that time. Equivalently: by virtue of conceptual necessity, no proposition that is either historically necessary or historically impossible at a given time is obligatory at that time.*

This principle is the conjunction of two principles:

OIHC+: If at a given time it is obligatory that p , then at that time it is historically possible that p (i.e., it is *not* historically impossible that p).³⁰

OIHC–: If at a given time it is obligatory that p , then at that time it is historically possible that it is not the case that p (i.e., it is *not* historically necessary that p).³¹

consequence that if the history of the world up to and including today, in conjunction with the laws of nature, logically entails that I will kill you tomorrow, then it is not obligatory that I fail to kill you tomorrow.)

- 30 One might object to OIHC+ by claiming that, in the dog example (see section 1), if a dog strays into the courthouse at noon, then the proposition that there are never any dogs in the courthouse is historically impossible at noon but is still obligatory at noon (since the regulation that prohibits dogs in the courthouse is still in force at noon). I reply first that, assuming that the regulation is not retroactive, it does not prohibit the presence of dogs in the courthouse at times *prior* to its enactment, and thus it does not render obligatory at any time the proposition that there are *never* any dogs in the courthouse. Instead, for any time t starting at the time at which it takes effect, the regulation renders obligatory at t (and maybe also at some later times, although this is irrelevant for present purposes) the proposition P_t that there are no dogs in the courthouse at any time after t (and also, for any time interval that starts after t , the proposition that there are no dogs in the courthouse at any time in that interval, although this is again irrelevant for present purposes). If a dog strays into the courthouse at noon, then, for any time t prior to noon, P_t is historically impossible at noon, and thus (by OIHC+) is not obligatory at noon. But the proposition P_{noon} (that there are no dogs in the courthouse at any time *after* noon) is still historically contingent at noon, and is (compatibly with OIHC) still obligatory at noon. So the claim that it is still obligatory at noon that there be no dogs in the courthouse, understood as the claim that P_{noon} is still obligatory at noon, is compatible with OIHC (and thus with OIHC+). (Cf. Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey,” 16.)
- 31 One might object to OIHC– by claiming that, since backwards causation is conceptually possible, the following scenario is also conceptually possible: in 2030, as I am about to

OIHC+ is structurally similar to OIC, and OIHC– is structurally similar to a principle that captures the idea that ‘ought’ implies ‘can avoid’. To defend OIHC, I will defend first OIHC+ and then OIHC–. Let $O_t(P)$ be the claim that proposition P is obligatory at time t , and let $O_t(P|H_t)$ be the claim that P is (conditionally) obligatory at t given the history H_t of the world up to and including t . Given this notation, here is my argument for OIHC+:

- P1. $O_t(P)$ conceptually entails $O_t(P|H_t)$.
- P2. $O_t(P|H_t)$ conceptually entails $O_t(P \& H_t|H_t)$.
- P3. $O_t(P \& H_t|H_t)$ conceptually entails that $P \& H_t$ is logically possible.

Therefore,

OIHC+: $O_t(P)$ conceptually entails that $P \& H_t$ is logically possible (i.e., P is historically possible at t : P is logically compatible with H_t).

Assuming that conceptual entailment is transitive, the argument is deductively valid.

P1 follows from the principle that $O_t(P)$ conceptually entails $O_t(P|Q)$ for any proposition Q that is historically necessary at t (as H_t is). To see that this principle is true, suppose that you are a soldier and your base is on alert, so your commander orders you at 5 PM to stand watch during the night (from midnight to 4 AM). Additionally, your commander decrees at 6 PM (without revoking the 5 PM order to you) that no one has to stand watch during the night if the alert is lifted before midnight. Then, assuming that there are no further normatively relevant considerations, it is obligatory (starting at 5 PM) that you stand watch during the night, but it is not (conditionally) obligatory (at any time starting at 6 PM) that (P) you stand watch during the night given that (Q) the alert is lifted before midnight. Suppose next that the alert is lifted at 8 PM, so the proposition that the alert is lifted before midnight is historically necessary starting at 8 PM. Then, starting at 8 PM, it is no longer obligatory that you stand watch during the night. More generally, if $O_t(P|Q)$ is false but Q is historically necessary at t , then $O_t(P)$ is also false—and this is equivalent to the above principle. Note

enter a time machine in my garage and travel back to 1930, you promise me that (P) the light in my garage will turn on shortly after I arrive in 1930, and in 2031 you push a button that causes the light in my garage to turn on shortly after I arrive in 1930. In this scenario (the objection continues), P is obligatory for you—and thus is obligatory—in 2030 but is historically necessary in 2030, contrary to OIHC–. (The objection assumes that there is only a single timeline, and so do I throughout this paper.) In reply, I submit that what your promise in the above scenario renders obligatory for you in 2030 is not P , but is instead the proposition R that you *make it the case* that P is true (e.g., by pushing the button in 2031): R is *not* historically necessary in 2030, so the claim that R is obligatory in 2030 is compatible with OIHC–.

that this reasoning does not carry over to propositions that are *not* historically necessary at t . In the above example, at 7 PM it is still obligatory that you stand watch during the night, although (a) it is not (conditionally) obligatory at 7 PM that you stand watch during the night given that the alert is lifted before midnight and (b) it is *true* (though at 7 PM not yet *historically necessary*) that the alert will be lifted before midnight.

p_2 follows from the principle that $O_t(P|Q)$ is conceptually equivalent to $O_t(P \& Q|Q)$ for any proposition Q . To see that this principle is true, note that conditionalizing on Q amounts to “shrinking” the logical space (and all propositions) by considering only worlds at which Q is true; so, given (i.e., conditional on) Q , the obligatoriness (more generally, the deontic) status of P is the same as the status of the proposition that one gets by “shrinking” P —namely, $P \& Q$ (this is the proposition that one gets from P by considering only worlds at which Q is true).

Finally, p_3 follows from the principle that (conditional) impersonal ‘ought’ implies ‘logically possible’: by virtue of conceptual necessity, every proposition that is (conditionally) obligatory at some time (or other) is logically possible. I take this principle to be relatively uncontroversial.

To defend next O_{IHC-} , I note first that an argument parallel to my argument for O_{IHC+} can be given by replacing my talk of a proposition being *obligatory* with talk of a proposition being *forbidden* (i.e., *impermissible*). Letting $F_t(P)$ be the claim that proposition P is (*pro tanto*) forbidden at time t , and similarly for $F_t(P|H_t)$, here is the parallel argument: $F_t(P)$ conceptually entails $F_t(P|H_t)$, which in turn conceptually entails $F_t(P \& H_t|H_t)$, which in turn conceptually entails that $P \& H_t$ is logically possible, so $F_t(P)$ conceptually entails that P is historically possible at t (*impermissibility implies historical possibility*). Given this result, O_{IHC-} quickly follows: $O_t(P)$ is conceptually equivalent to the claim that $\sim P$ (i.e., the negation of P) is forbidden at t , which by the above result conceptually entails that $\sim P$ is historically possible at t , so $O_t(P)$ conceptually entails that $\sim P$ is historically possible at t .³² This concludes my argument for

32 The conceptual equivalence between the all-things-considered obligatoriness of P and the all-things-considered impermissibility of $\sim P$ is widely accepted in deontic logic (see, e.g., Belzer, “Deontic Logic”; Hilpinen and McNamara, “Deontic Logic,” 43; McNamara, “Deontic Logic”; Rønneidal, *An Introduction to Deontic Logic*, 28–29), but it seems clear that there is also a conceptual equivalence (to which I appeal in the text) between the (*pro tanto*) obligatoriness of P and the (*pro tanto*) impermissibility of $\sim P$: for example, the claim that it is now obligatory that there be no dogs in the courthouse is conceptually equivalent to the claim that it is now forbidden that there be any dogs in the courthouse. Consequently, the principle that, by virtue of conceptual necessity, every proposition that is (conditionally) forbidden at some time (or other) is logically possible (which underlies my claim that $F_t(P \& H_t|H_t)$ conceptually entails that $P \& H_t$ is logically possible) is

OIHC \neg , and also my argument for OIHC. Note that since $O_t(P)$ is conceptually equivalent to $F_t(\sim P)$ and the claim that P is historically contingent at t is logically equivalent to the claim that $\sim P$ is historically contingent at t , OIHC is conceptually equivalent to the principle that, by virtue of conceptual necessity, every proposition that is *forbidden* at a given time is historically contingent at that time. It is not too hard to see that OIHC is, therefore, also conceptually equivalent to the principle that, *by virtue of conceptual necessity, every proposition that is either historically necessary or historically impossible at a given time is neither obligatory nor forbidden at that time.*³³

One might argue that, even if OIHC is true, it is too weak because it only precludes propositions that are *wholly about the past* of a given time (e.g., the proposition that I skipped breakfast yesterday) from being obligatory at that time. I reply that this is not so: OIHC also precludes some propositions that are *not* wholly about the past of a given time from being obligatory at that time. For example, suppose that on Friday you take out a loan repayable in ten monthly installments; the first installment is due on Monday, but you fail to pay it on time. Then the proposition that *you pay all ten installments on time* is historically impossible on Tuesday but is *not* wholly about the past of Tuesday (i.e., *not* all times that the proposition is about are in the past of Tuesday) and is (by OIHC) *not* obligatory on Tuesday. To see that this result is correct, suppose for *reductio* that (1) on Tuesday it is obligatory that you pay all ten installments on time. Note that (2) the proposition that you pay all ten installments on time (which entails that you pay the first installment on Monday) is incompatible with the proposition (which is historically possible on Tuesday) that you pay the first installment on Tuesday or later: it is impossible to pay the first installment twice. But (3) if a proposition P is obligatory at time t and P is incompatible with a proposition

conceptually equivalent to the principle that, by virtue of conceptual necessity, no logically necessary proposition is (conditionally) obligatory at any time. See note 37 below for a possible objection to the latter principle.

- 33 It follows that every such proposition is *not all-things-considered* forbidden either at the given time (because being all-things-considered forbidden at a given time entails being *pro tanto* forbidden at that time). It does not follow, however, that every such proposition is all-things-considered *permissible* at the given time; defending this lies beyond the scope of the present paper, but for a defense, see Bedke, "Passing the Deontic Buck," 147–51; Olson, "In Defense of Moral Error Theory," 68–70, *Moral Error Theory*, 11–15, and "Error Theory in Metaethics," 60–62.

By ignoring p_1 and considering only p_2 and p_3 , my argument also supports the principle that $O_t(P|H_t)$ conceptually entails that P is historically contingent at t . Given that H_t is historically necessary at t , it follows that $O_t(H_t|H_t)$ is false.

Q which is historically possible at t , then Q is forbidden at t .³⁴ 1, 2, and 3 jointly entail that (4) on Tuesday it is forbidden that you pay the first installment on Tuesday or later. But since you do not pay the first installment on Monday, when it is due, (5) on Tuesday it is clearly *not* forbidden that you pay the first installment on Tuesday or later.³⁵ The contradiction between 4 and 5 completes the *reductio*, and I conclude that on Tuesday it is *not* obligatory that you pay all ten installments on time—and it counts in favor of OIHC that it explains why.

Barry Loewer and Marvin Belzer defend a principle that appears to contradict OIHC: “If the truth of A is settled at t , then at t it ought to be that A .”³⁶ The contradiction may be only apparent: “it ought to be that A ,” as used by Loewer and Belzer, may not correspond to obligatoriness. Nevertheless, it may be worth noting some problems with the principle (which does contradict OIHC) that every proposition that is historically necessary (i.e., settled) at a given time is obligatory at that time.³⁷ First, suppose that you call me at 2 PM

- 34 Equivalently: if a proposition P is obligatory at time t and P entails a proposition R which is not historically necessary at t , then R is also obligatory at t . Some objections to this principle can be proposed (see Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning*, 126; Heuer, “Reasons and Impossibility,” 243–44; Kolodny, “Instrumental Reasons”; Raz, “The Myth of Instrumental Rationality”; White, “Transmission Failures”; contrast Kiesewetter, “Instrumental Normativity”), but they are irrelevant to the case at hand.
- 35 In fact, (6) on Tuesday it is *obligatory* that you pay the first installment on Tuesday or later: since you do not pay the first installment on Monday, when it is due, on Tuesday you must pay it as soon as possible. Although 6 does not entail 5 (since the impermissibility in 5 is *pro tanto*), 6 provides another argument against the claim that (1) on Tuesday it is obligatory that you pay all ten installments on time: if 6 and 1 are both true, then on Tuesday incompatible propositions are obligatory, which seems clearly false.
- 36 Loewer and Belzer, “Dyadic Deontic Detachment,” 306; cf. “Help for the Good Samaritan Paradox,” 125; Feldman, *Doing the Best We Can*, 43, 189.
- 37 Several authors accept the following weaker principle: every logically necessary proposition is obligatory (at every time). (See Anderson, “The Formal Analysis of Normative Systems,” 181–83; Åqvist, “Deontic Logic,” 616–17, and *Introduction to Deontic Logic and the Theory of Normative Systems*, 19–20; Bailhache, *Essai de Logique Déontique*, 17–19, 23–24; Hansson, “An Analysis of Some Deontic Logics,” 380; Prior, “Escapism,” 137–38; Segerberg, “Some Logics of Commitment and Obligation,” 152; Stenius, “The Principles of a Logic of Normative Systems,” 253; cf. Føllesdal and Hilpinen, “Deontic Logic,” 13; van Fraassen, “The Logic of Conditional Obligation,” 421. For rejections of the principle, see al-Hibri, *Deontic Logic*, 14–16; Carmo and Jones, “Deontic Logic and Contrary-to-Duties,” 270, 294, 338; Dahl, ““Ought” Implies “Can” and Deontic Logic,” 501; Harrison, “More Deviant Logic,” 23; Mares, “Andersonian Deontic Logic,” 11–12; Pigden, “Logic and the Autonomy of Ethics,” 139; Prior, *Formal Logic*, 221–22; van Rijen, review of *Doing the Best We Can*, 265; von Wright, “Deontic Logic,” 10–11, “On the Logic of Norms and Actions,” 8, and “Action Logic as a Basis for Deontic Logic,” 60. On this debate, see also Humberstone, *Philosophical Applications of Modal Logic*, 246, and “Recent Thought on *Is* and *Ought*,” 1429.) Defenders of the principle typically acknowledge that our intuitions (concerning,

and thus you satisfy your obligation (arising from your promise) to call me by 2 PM. Then, according to the above principle, after 2 PM it is (still) obligatory (since it is historically necessary) that you call me by 2 PM, and this remains obligatory forever (even after you die). Second, suppose that you kill me at 2 PM, and thus you violate your obligation to never kill me. Then, according to the above principle, after 2 PM it is obligatory (since it is historically necessary) that at some time (or other) you kill me. I take it that these consequences of the above principle are implausible enough to warrant rejecting the principle.³⁸

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- for example, the claim that it is obligatory that either it is raining or it is not raining) are inconclusive or even go against the principle, but nevertheless accept the principle because it is “harmless” and it simplifies deontic logic. But given my rejection in the text of the stronger principle that every proposition that is historically necessary at a given time is obligatory at that time, it would, in fact, *complicate* deontic logic to accept that *some* historically necessary propositions (the logically necessary ones) are obligatory while other ones are not. Moreover, as al-Hibri (*Deontic Logic*, 15) notes, it seems false that it is *morally* (and also, I add, *legally*, etc.) obligatory that either it is raining or it is not raining.
- 38 Objecting to my argument for OIHC, one might claim that my argument commits me to the principle that $O_t(P)$ conceptually entails $O_t(P \& Q)$ for any proposition Q that is historically necessary at t (because $O_t(P)$ conceptually entails $O_t(P \& Q|Q)$ by the principles that I used to defend P1 and P2, and $O_t(P \& Q|Q)$ conceptually entails $O_t(P \& Q)$ by “unalterability detachment”: see Nute and Yu, “Introduction,” 9). But the above principle (and thus my argument for OIHC) should be rejected (the objection continues) because it has the consequence that (1) it is obligatory that both (P) I pay my taxes this year and (Q) Lincoln is assassinated at some time or other (assuming that P is obligatory, and given that Q is historically necessary), and this consequence is almost as implausible as the claim (which I reject) that (2) Q is obligatory—or so the objection goes. In reply, I grant that 1 *appears* false, but I submit that this is because there are three *apparently* sound but, in fact, unsound arguments against 1. *First argument*: 1 entails 2, and 2 is false, so 1 is false. This argument is unsound because 1 does not entail 2: $O_t(P \& Q)$ entails $O_t(Q)$ only if Q is *not* historically necessary at t . *Second argument*: $P \& Q$ is partly about the past (i.e., some of the times that $P \& Q$ is about are in the past), but (3) no proposition that is partly about the past of t is obligatory at t , so 1 is false. This argument is unsound because 3 is false (see Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey,” 17): if at 8 AM you promise that you will never smoke again (starting immediately) and, for this reason, you acquire a corresponding obligation O , then at any time t shortly (e.g., one nanosecond) after 8 AM the proposition that you never smoke starting at 8 AM is partly about the past of t but is obligatory (because it is obligatory for you: otherwise, you would—implausibly—have obligation O for at most a single time instant—namely, at most at 8 AM). *Third argument*: Q is all-things-considered forbidden, and thus so is $P \& Q$ (since it entails Q), so 1 is false. This argument is invalid (because $P \& Q$ can be both *pro tanto* obligatory and all-things-considered forbidden), but is also unsound because, although Q was forbidden *before* Lincoln was assassinated, Q is no longer forbidden: it is implausible to claim that Q remains forbidden forever (cf. Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can,” 200–201n10, and “I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey,” 9). In sum, I see no good reason to reject 1. Moreover, here is a scenario in which 1 is true: if I promise that $P \& Q$ will be true, then $P \& Q$ is obligatory *for me* (given that I can make it the case that $P \& Q$ is true: by paying my taxes, I can bring to completion a causal process—see

4. CONCLUSION

I argued that some propositions are impersonally obligatory—namely, obligatory *simpliciter* (i.e., morally required) but not personally obligatory (i.e., not morally required of anyone). This suggests, and some of my examples confirm, that obligatoriness *simpliciter* is irreducible to personal obligatoriness. I submit that claims of obligatoriness *simpliciter* tell us what is morally required from a standpoint that is distinct from—but takes into account and weighs against each other—the standpoints that correspond to particular agents.³⁹ In this respect, the distinction between obligatoriness for a given agent and obligatoriness *simpliciter* is analogous to the distinction between goodness for a given agent and goodness *simpliciter*.⁴⁰ I also argued that personal obligatoriness and obligatoriness *simpliciter* are subject to different constraints: personal obligatoriness is constrained by the abilities of agents (and also by historical contingency), whereas obligatoriness *simpliciter* is constrained by historical contingency but not by the abilities of agents. I conclude that personal obligatoriness and obligatoriness *simpliciter* are significantly different, and the distinction between them deserves further investigation.⁴¹

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Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can Obey,” 18n41—resulting in $P \ \& \ Q$ becoming historically necessary), and then (1) $P \ \& \ Q$ is obligatory. In no analogous scenario is 2 true (because, if I promise that Q will be true, Q is not obligatory for me since I cannot make it the case that Q is true), so I deny that 1 is almost as implausible as 2.

39 Cf. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* and *The View from Nowhere*.

40 See Schroeder, “Value Theory”; cf. Hurka, “Against ‘Good for’/‘Well-Being’, for ‘Simply Good.’”

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