

Ought but Cannot

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1. In what follows I report on some work I have been doing in connection with what I am going to call *infinite moral consciousness*. I use this term to refer to configurations of moral consciousness that are organized around *infinite ideals*. An infinite ideal is a norm or demand that retains its authority over us even in the face of our conviction that the norm itself is impossible for us to fulfill. I am particularly interested in the case where these infinite norms take the form of obligations or duties. In that case one would find oneself in the paradoxical circumstance of having an obligation to do something that is impossible to do. This itself may well sound absurd, and indeed one of my aims here will be to plumb that sense of absurdity. But I also suspect that – whether absurd or not – infinite moral consciousness has been an influential configuration of moral experience for several millennia. If only for that reason, I think it merits scrutiny.

2. The issues surrounding infinite moral consciousness are complex and diverse – some psychological, some ethical, some theological, others logical. I shall not try to survey all this here, much less to settle the various vexing problems that arise in this connection. Instead I propose to take a rather narrow approach, and an oppositional one. Though I find myself perversely sympathetic to the possibility of infinite moral consciousness (and other forms of infinite practical consciousness related to it), my strategy here will be to consider a challenge to very idea, particularly where infinite ideals take the form of infinite obligations. For to accept even the possibility of infinite obligations is to run afoul of a fundamental and familiar principle of ethics, the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. Accordingly, my aim here shall be to consider the standing of this principle, in order to see what room, if any, it leaves open for infinite moral consciousness.

3. The principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ is a very widely (though not universally) accepted principle of ethical reasoning. It admits of various formulations, but roughly the idea is that if a person (S) has an obligation to perform an action (ϕ), then it must be possible for S to ϕ . I am going to refer to this principle by the acronym OIC. Some version of OIC is often treated as an axiom of deontic logic, as for instance in the pioneering work of Bernard Bolzano in the 19th century. In the 20th century it was notably defended by R.M. Hare, who took a version of the principle to be a consequence of his prescriptivist semantics for ethical discourse. But the figure most closely associated with ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ is certainly Immanuel Kant. So much so, indeed, that among deontic logicians the

principle is known simply as ‘Kant’s Law’ – something of a slight to the Categorical Imperative, to be sure.

4. The principle that ought implies can has sometimes been described as a truism of moral philosophy. I suppose there are various things that might be meant by this. To call OIC a truism might mean that the claim is simply obvious and uncontroversially true. Or it might mean that it is something that people simply take for granted. I think that in the latter sense OIC probably *is* a truism of moral philosophy. By and large people *do* take its truth for granted, which has the knock-on effect that one rarely finds the principle explicitly formulated and defended. But (and here is a key point) OIC is certainly *not* a truism in the first sense, at least if one takes a long enough view. For in the long history of ethics there is in fact a very long-standing and robust tradition that is committed to denying the principle – committed, as I have been putting the point, to a certain domain of *ought but cannot*.

5. I am still in the process of surveying this counter-tradition, and I am keen to hear news of any further sightings of it. I expect that it is now by-and-large a submerged tradition. But I think there was a time when it was more-or-less ascendant. The clearest examples come from within the Judeo-Christian tradition. So, for example, Christ is reported in the Gospels as telling his disciples to *be perfect*. (“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”¹) But he surely knew that they could not be perfect; he full well knew their imperfections. Saint Paul is often reported as having enjoined Christians to “Live the life of Christ”. The Pauline Epistles don’t in fact say exactly that (Galatians 2:20 enjoins the Galatians to “Let Christ live through you”), but nonetheless the Pauline Ethical tradition has often been interpreted to mean that a Christian should live as Christ lived – that is (according to Christian theology) faultlessly. But at the same time it is a fundamental doctrine of Christian theology that man *cannot* live faultlessly, being a fallen and corrupted being. If we assume that these commands generate obligations then it would seem that, for the Christian at least, there are certain moral obligations that are strictly impossible to fulfill. *Ought but cannot*. A particularly vigorous and explicit version of this ethical framework can be found in the writings of the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. As Luther sees it, the commandments of God are impossible for imperfect human beings to follow. Luther’s favorite example is a commandment from the Torah: “Thou shalt not covet.” The Judeo-Christian God gives man this commandment; Judeo-Christian man thus has an obligation to obey it. But it is in fact impossible for human beings to obey this law, according to Luther, given the kind of beings they are. Here is a representative passage from Luther:

For example, the commandment, “You shall not covet,” is a command which proves us all to be sinners, for no one can avoid coveting no matter how much he may struggle against it. ... As we fare with respect to one commandment, so we fare with all, for it is equally impossible for us to keep any one of them.²

¹ Matthew 5:48

² Martin Luther *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520); translated in *The Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, four volumes, Th. Tappert (ed.); Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007; vol II, p 24.

6. It is not my intention here to defend Judeo-Christian ethics per se. I cite these examples not in order to recommend their particular moral content, but only to establish the crucial point that OIC *cannot* simply be treated as an obvious and uncontentious truth. The example of Luther is particularly pertinent for my purposes, since Kant himself was writing and teaching in a strongly Lutheran religious environment, and the writings of Luther himself would have been a staple in the kind of education he and his readers received. If Kant does indeed hold that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ then it would seem that he owes his readers some kind of defense of this principle in the face of the Lutheran and Pauline tradition which denies it. *So what kind of defense might be on offer* – either from Kant himself, from contemporary Kantians, or elsewhere in the history of ethics or in the scholarship of moral philosophy?

7. Before turning to this question directly, there is a technical issue to be raised – an issue about just what *kind* of entailment is meant to hold between ‘ought’ and ‘can’. Kant himself famously distinguishes between two fundamentally different classes of true statements. Analytic truths are true simply in virtue of the meaning of the terms used to express them. Or as Kant canonically puts it, a claim is true analytically if the concept in the predicate position is itself contained within the concept in the subject position. Any truth that is not true analytically is said to be true synthetically. This Kantian distinction applies in the first instance to sentences or propositions, but it can also be applied to implications or entailments. One proposition can imply the truth of another either analytically (in virtue of the meaning of the concepts) or synthetically (otherwise). Of course in recent times the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic has itself been the target of criticism, but for Kant the distinction is sacrosanct. Hence if Kant holds that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ – i.e., that ‘S ought to φ ’ implies ‘S can φ ’ then it is perfectly fair to ask: *is the implication analytic or synthetic?* That is, does the very meaning of the ‘ought’ somehow contain the notion of ‘can’ – in a way analogous to the way that ‘bachelor’ contains ‘unmarried’? Or is the implication one that requires more than merely understanding the meaning of the concepts involved? And if the latter (if the implication is synthetic) then what else does one need to recognize *beyond* the meaning of the terms in order to show that the implication holds?

8. This last point takes the form of a dilemma. Part of my strategy so far in this research has been to try to break through the general complacency that one often encounters about OIC. The first step is to make people realize that, historically anyway, the principle has not been uncontentious; if it is true then it needs to be defended against those who deny it, rather than simply assumed. And since Kantians have been so closely associated with the principle, my strategy is to present them with this dilemma. “You *say* that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. So then which way does the implication hold: analytically or synthetically?” And there is then a follow-up move based on this dilemma. If the implication is meant to be analytic then the Kantians (and other defenders of OIC) owe us an analysis of the concept of ‘ought’ which shows that it contains the concept of ‘can’. If the implication is synthetic then they owe us an account of the synthesis. What exactly is it that builds the inferential bridge from the ‘ought’ to the ‘can’? Indeed, given that OIC admits of no *empirical* justification (it is not an *a posteriori* truth), it

would seem that on this second horn, OIC would be a synthetic *a priori* truth, and its defense would require something like a transcendental deduction.

9. With this framework in hand, I want now to consider various lines of argument which might be used in support of OIC, both in order to assess their merits but also to consider them in light of this dilemma. In doing so I want also to keep in mind the context of the divergence between Kant and Luther over this issue. Are there arguments that a Kantian could use to answer a Lutheran opponent on this matter? And if it turns out that Luther has made a mistake, what kind of mistake has he made?

10. There are a number of different argumentative strategies that might be deployed in support of OIC, but for present purposes I propose to focus on three. The first is a *reductio* strategy, which seeks to establish that the denial of OIC leads to an absurdity. The second, more constructive strategy, is essentially Hare's, which takes its point of departure from the logic of imperatives. The third is an argument rooted in the distinctive strategies that have informed formal deontic logic. Allow me to consider these three strategies in turn.

11. If indeed 'ought' is now widely thought to imply 'can,' I suspect that this is in large part because the opposite position is thought to be absurd. Accordingly, in identifying and assessing arguments in support of OIC, it makes sense to start by trying to probe this sense of absurdity. This in turn might provide an indirect way of navigating the dilemma posed above. For of course the negation of an analytic truth is a contradiction, and contradiction is itself the logically canonical form of absurdity. So a *reductio* argument might provide a way of establishing that OIC is an analytic implication. The key will be to determine just where the purported absurdity lies.

12. So suppose that you are a person of good character, sensitive to moral considerations, and generally trying to behave honourably in life and do what duty requires. In short, you are a person who tries to act in accordance with your moral obligations. You pay your taxes, treat others with respect, keep your promises, honour your father and mother ... whatever it takes. But now let's suppose that some circumstance arises where you find yourself torn about what to do. Maybe you are Antigone in the grips of a dreadful moral conflict: you feel a moral duty to bury your recently fallen brother, yet you also feel allegiance to the laws of your city, in accordance with which your brother has been declared a traitor and unworthy of burial. Or maybe you are a moderately affluent modern resident of the West, and you are troubled by the dreadful events unfolding in Africa: the starvation, the civil unrest, the abuse of human rights. You find yourself wondering about your moral obligations in such a circumstance. Or perhaps it comes time to pay your taxes, yet you find that your own government is using those tax revenues in support of some policy that you think is morally unacceptable. These are all meant to be descriptions of circumstances where you find yourself wondering about your obligations. "What ought I to do?"

13. Now it is important to be clear that nothing in what I have just said is meant to provide an analysis of the notion of 'ought' or 'moral obligation.' All we have done so far is to identify a characteristic circumstance in which these notions have a *use*. Let's call that circumstance a circumstance of deliberation. In all three cases just described I have to deliberate; I have to decide which among the courses of action available to me I should choose to pursue. And in trying to make that decision, one factor concerns the question of what I am *obliged* to do. Am I obliged to follow the law of the city, even in these extreme circumstances? Do I have a duty to pay my taxes when they are to be used in this way? What duties do I have to those suffering in distant lands? Now the course of deliberation in such circumstances can be quite vexed and perhaps intricate. Part of what is so gripping is that the answer is just not at all obvious. If I am philosophically inclined I may start wondering quite generally about what morality requires. If I am religious I may go back to the sources in my religious tradition to look for guidance there, and then try to apply that guidance to the case at hand. Or perhaps I will consult a trusted friend to ask for advice.

14. But now suppose that in the course of deliberation I come up against some purported obligation that I cannot fulfill. Perhaps Bob Geldof tells me that the winners in the global economy have an obligation to end world hunger. That sounds right to me, and I count myself a winner in the global economy, so I conclude that *I* have an obligation to end world hunger. I suddenly feel humbled in the face of my enormous obligation. But such a purported obligation also presents a problem. For it seems safe to assume that ending world hunger is not itself something that lies within *my* power. And of course *I* can only do such things as lie within *my* power. Accordingly, the purported discovery of this sublime obligation still seems to leave me with my original deliberative task. After all, the whole point of my deliberative exercise was to decide what to do. But that means that I have to figure out which *among the options available to me* is the one to which I should devote my energies. If the consideration of my obligations is to have any point or application in the circumstance of deliberation, then it *only makes sense* to consider those purported obligations that fall within my powers.

15. If this is right, then there may indeed be an absurdity lurking in the very idea of infinite obligations. If I find myself thinking that I have an obligation to do something I cannot do, then the rational thing is to *think again*. I must have made an error in applying Geldof's principle. I can allow that it would be *good* to end world hunger; I might conclude that I have an obligation *to join others in a global campaign* against world hunger. Perhaps I even have an obligation *to do everything I can* to end world hunger – i.e., all that is within my power. But these are all finite claims; indeed it is tautologically true that I can do everything within my power! In this way we have avoided what seemed to be the absurdity, but only by finitizing the purportedly infinite obligation. Genuinely infinite obligations simply have no use in the deliberative business of choosing a course of action from among the possibilities that I face.

16. Before assessing this argument directly, we need to explore a tangent that may turn out to be important. The crucial thing is to recognize that there are in fact two different, and diametrically opposed ways that the OIC principle might be deployed in reasoning. Here I am not talking about how one might try to *prove* or *establish* the truth of OIC, but how one might *use the principle* if one were confident that it were sound. To see this it may be useful to start out with an analogy from ordinary logic. It is a familiar fact of logic that a conditional premise can be used in two quite different patterns of inference. If I know that P is true, and I know that the conditional (P→Q) is true, then I can safely conclude that Q is true (*modus ponens*). But I can equally well use the same conditional premise to work backwards from the negation: If I know the conditional (P→Q) and I know that Q is *not* true, then I can safely conclude that P is not true either (*modus tollens*). The conditional premise is common to both inferences, but is put to very different uses.

17. Something exactly analogous applies to the inferential use of OIC. If I start out being sure of my capacities then I can use OIC in order to establish a restriction on the scope of my duties and obligations. (Call this the duty-restricting application of OIC.) But if I start out being sure of my duties and obligations then I could just as well use OIC to *expand* my understanding of the scope of my capacities. (Call this the capacity-expanding application of OIC.) I am using the duty-restricting application of OIC if I reason as follows:

There is nothing I can do to achieve world peace by lunchtime, and since ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, it follows that it cannot be my duty to achieve world peace by lunchtime. Whew!

I am using the capacity-expanding application of OIC if I reason as follows:

I ought to bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number; ‘ought’ implies ‘can’; so it must be the case that I *can* bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Wow!

What matters here is not the particular capacities or duties in these examples; one can substitute any ones you like. The point is that there are two inferential uses available. Here they are in schematic form:

Duty-Restricting Application:

I cannot ϕ .
 If I ought to ϕ then I can ϕ .
 \therefore It is not the case that I ought to ϕ

Capacity-Expanding Application:

I ought to ϕ .
 If I ought to ϕ then I can ϕ .
 \therefore I can ϕ .

But we must take some care with this terminology. When I call these the duty-restricting and capacity-expanding applications respectively, I do not mean to suggest that the inference itself actually expands or restricts our duties or capacities. In this way the terminology is misleading. The point is rather that I can use these inferential patterns either to *learn* something about the scope of my duties, or to *learn* something about the scope of my capacities. Perhaps a more technically accurate name for these two

applications would be a *modus tollens* application and a *modus ponens* application – or the *Whew!* and the *Wow!* applications respectively.

18. So with this distinction in hand we can come back to the *reductio* argument we have been considering. That argument tries to identify a certain kind of absurdity in the denial of OIC in any circumstance of deliberation: unfulfillable obligations lack application or use in the context of deciding what to do. But it should be clear that this argument presupposes the *modus tollens* application of the principle – the application where I start out with a sense for my capacities or options and then use OIC to determine a principled limit on my obligations. But here is the odd thing. Kant himself does not generally use the principle in this way. Instead Kant’s primary deployment of the principle involves a case where one is certain of one’s obligations or duties and then uses OIC to gain a new sense for the possibilities that must in principle be open. It is a *Wow!* application rather than a *Whew!* application (*modus ponens* not *modus tollens*, capacity-expanding rather than duty-restricting).

19. It would be natural at this point to go on to give some examples of this Kantian application of OIC, but for various reasons I am loathe to do so. In order to get a rough sense of how such an application might go, it may help to think, for example, of a soldier, fighting for a cause he knows to be just, but facing some extreme and terrifying test of his courage in battle. In facing down this dreadful threat we can imagine him reaching a point where he wonders whether he can really do it; it just seems so hard, and he feels an overwhelming urge to flee. The idea may now feel somewhat old-fashioned, but it doesn’t seem entirely implausible that in such a circumstance the soldier might calm his fear, and allay his anxious wondering about his abilities by reminding himself of what his duty requires. “I *have* to do it; it is the *right* thing to do; it is what *duty* requires.” And so-saying he steels himself for the challenge with a renewed confidence in his abilities. If we can make sense of that thought then we can imagine a case where someone is *more sure of his obligation than he is of his ability* and so uses OIC to convince himself that his abilities do include something over which he had been uncertain.

20. I hasten to add that the foregoing example is not Kant’s.³ His own capacity-expanding deployment of OIC is *much* more ambitious. I won’t try to reproduce it here, because the important thing is not so much the *particular* use he makes of OIC, nor indeed whether that particular application is ultimately defensible. The main point for my purposes is simply that the *reductio* argument we considered above is not really available to Kant, insofar as his main reliance on OIC is not in the service of restricting obligation but in expanding capacities. Let me try to state this point more exactly. The *reductio* argument for OIC depended crucially on an appeal to what I dubbed ‘the context of deliberation.’ And as I described that context it is one where the deliberator starts out with knowledge of what she can do (what she is *able* to do) and tries to decide what she *ought* to do (what duty requires). Antigone knows that she *can* either bury or not bury her brother. Both options are available to her; the problem is to

³ But for something similar, see Kant’s famous remarks about erecting gallows on the doorstep; *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. V, 30.

choose, to decide which action is right. There is no doubt that I *could* give all my money to poverty victims (here; just sign the cheque!), or *could* keep some of it for myself. The question is which one of these potential actions I should actualize. The absurdity we encountered arose specifically within that context: *if I already know I cannot ϕ then I simply have no deliberative use for the claim that I ought to ϕ* . But this combination of absurdity-producing ingredients is absent in the Kantian deployments. The soldier *doesn't* start with knowledge of what he can do. That is *exactly* what is in question. Where there is uncertainty or indeterminacy about what lies within my power then the absurdity identified above no longer arises. So if *Kant* has a way of establishing OIC it must be on the basis of an entirely different line of argument.⁴

21. I am keenly interested to know what that different line of argument would be, but for now let me set aside these *ad hominem* considerations in order to assess the *reductio* argument itself. Here, the key point I want to press is that the *reductio* argument, at least as I have constructed it, does *not* yield an analytic construal of OIC. One way to see this is simply to remind ourselves of what I noted earlier, viz., that in elaborating the *reductio* argument we in fact said *nothing* about what 'ought' means. Rather than turning on an analysis of the concept of obligation, the *reductio* argument appealed instead to a certain kind of use of the notion. It was in these circumstances – the attempt to use infinite obligations in practical deliberation – that the absurdity arose. The *reductio* argument is thus best understood as yielding a *synthetic* construal of OIC, where the key to the synthesis lies in appreciating the distinctive structure of a circumstance of deliberation, rather than simply analyzing the meaning of 'ought.' This in turn raises questions about the scope of the validity of OIC. Even if we allowed that the *reductio* argument establishes OIC *for the use of 'ought' in deliberation*, the question would remain open as regards other uses of 'ought.' I shall return to this open question below; but first I proceed to consider other argumentative strategies.

22. In *Freedom and Reason*, R.M. Hare mounts an explicit defense of the claim that 'ought' implies 'can.'⁵ His defense is subtle and qualified, and I shall not be able to do full justice to it here. Nonetheless it will be worth considering one of its distinctive elements in order to bring a second line of argument into view.

23. Hare's defense of OIC is subject to two important qualifications. First, he argues that the principle applies only when 'ought' is used, as he puts it, "with full force." With this first qualification Hare means to allow that there may be circumstances where we feel the force of an obligation even though

⁴ This paper is not intended as a contribution to the interpretation of Kant's texts, and accordingly I shall not hazard a reconstruction of Kant's own basis for OIC. Any such reconstruction must in the end be quite speculative, for Kant himself says surprisingly little in defense of the principle. For a useful discussion, see Robert Stern, "Does 'Ought' Imply 'Can'? And Did Kant think it Does?," *Utilitas* 16 (2004), 42-61. I note, however, that in his survey of passages, Stern passes over a puzzling remark in the body of Kant's text at *Ak. V*, 143 – a passage that might be used to support the thought that for Kant, OIC is a synthetic *a priori* truth. A fuller discussion must be reserved for another occasion.

⁵ R.M. Hare, "'Ought' and 'Can'"; Chapter 4 of *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963).

we find ourselves unable to fulfill it. Hare imagines someone saying, regretfully, “I ought to go see him, but I can’t, because I don’t know where he is.”⁶ Such a remark is perfectly coherent and may well be true, but only because the use of ‘ought’ here expresses what Hare, following Ross, calls a *prima facie* obligation – one that is in this case defeated by the facts of the circumstance. It is only when it comes to an *all things considered* obligation that OIC comes into play. Even here, however, Hare denies that the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ is properly understood as a logical entailment. This is the second qualification. Strictly speaking, Hare claims, ‘ought’ does not *imply* ‘can’; *its use presupposes it*.⁷ On this point Hare borrows from Strawson’s account of non-referring expressions, as also from Grice’s theory of conversational implicature. If someone claims that the present King of France is wise, then (on Strawson’s account) their utterance *presupposes* that there is presently a King of France. In the absence of such a presupposition, the question as to the King’s wisdom simply does not arise. So similarly, according to Hare, the ascription of an all things considered obligation to someone presupposes that that person has the ability to fulfill the obligation. Hare:

[I]f we say that somebody ought to do a certain thing, and ‘ought’ has its full (i.e., universally prescriptive) force, then we give our hearers to understand that we think that the question arises to which this is a possible answer, which it would not, unless the person in question were able to do the acts referred to.⁸

24. The key to this position, and to the argument meant to support it, lies in Hare’s prescriptivist account of moral language. In this respect, Hare’s view bears a clear Kantian lineage, insofar as both treat ‘ought’-claims as disguised imperatives. (In Kant’s case the disguise is particularly thin, insofar as the basic law of morality is explicitly formulated as an imperative.) To say, full force, that S ought to ϕ is thus effectively akin to commanding S to ϕ . This in turn provides the basic warrant for Hare’s claim about ‘ought’ and ‘can’. Hare: “[I]t is because they are prescriptive that moral words possess that property which is summed up, perhaps over-crudely, in the slogan, ‘Ought’ implies ‘can’.”⁹ Since ought-claims are like commands, they are also subject to the constraints that govern commands. So if it makes no sense to command someone to do something that one knows he cannot do, it also makes no sense to say that he ought to do it. Hare: “It would not do to tell a soldier to pick up his rifle if it were fixed to the ground.” Alan Donagan describes such a command as “ill-formed”, and goes as far as to say that a command to do the impossible “would not be a genuine command.”¹⁰ It is on this basis, and with these qualifications, that Hare claims title to OIC:

If somebody said ‘Fall down the stairs by accident’ or ‘Go to the wrong room by mistake’, we should be at a loss to know what he was telling us to do These illustrations could also be used to show that, in similar circumstances, an “ought I?” question would be equally incomprehensible, provided that ‘ought’ was alleged to be being used with its full force.¹¹

⁶ Hare 1963: 52.

⁷ For a related line of analysis see Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “‘Ought’ Conversationally Implies ‘Can’”; *The Philosophical Review* 93:2 (1984), 249-261.

⁸ Hare 1963: 54, emphasis added.

⁹ Hare 1963: 51.

¹⁰ Alan Donagan, “Consistency in Rationalist Moral Systems” *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984), 298.

¹¹ Hare 1963: 60.

25. As this last passage brings out, there is much in common between Hare's argument and the *reductio* argument we considered above. Where the first argument turned on an appeal to the circumstance of deliberation, Hare's argument depends on consideration of the circumstance of command, or of imperatival and prescriptive speech acts more generally. And just as the structure of deliberation seemed to leave no useful function for impossible obligations, Hare's argument depends on an analogous claim about imperatives and prescriptions. Where does this leave us in terms of our original dilemma? Is Hare's OIC analytic or synthetic? Here we must exercise some care. The fact that Hare's argument is rooted in his semantic analysis of moral discourse might lead us to think that his proof of OIC makes it analytic. But this would be a mistake. For although Hare's argument *depends* on his prescriptivist analysis of 'ought', this analysis is not itself sufficient to generate his result. From the semantic component of Hare's argument we get the equivalence between 'ought'-claims and imperatives. But in order to get the conclusion that 'ought' implies 'can', Hare relies essentially on claims about the *function* or *point* of commands and imperatives, on a claim about the circumstances in which a prescriptive speech act is appropriate. This is not a result that is obtained by semantic analysis of 'ought' but by insight into the pragmatic context and contextual presuppositions at work in the issuing of commands. And this in turn is reflected in the two qualifications upon which Hare insists. If OIC were truly analytic, the implication would indeed be a logical entailment and universal in scope. But as we have seen, Hare explicitly rejects both these claims. So in this respect, too, Hare's argument is logically similar to the first argument we considered above. Both yield a synthetic implication, since both rely on claims about the function or use, and not simply the meaning, of the terms involved.

26. Let me turn to a third argument (or rather to a family of arguments) drawn in this case from what is known as *deontic logic*. Deontic logic is the branch of logic that investigates the inferential relations that hold among notions such as obligation, permission, prohibition, and so on. As already noted, some version of '*ought*' implies '*can*' has sometimes been claimed as a theorem of deontic logic. For our purposes this is of considerable significance. Deontic logic in effect treats 'ought' as a logical notion; a successful deontic logic would thus articulate the meaning of 'ought' in much the way that ordinary logic specifies the meaning of 'not,' 'all,' 'if and only if,' and so on. So if OIC is indeed a theorem of deontic logic, that would provide significant evidence both for OIC itself and for an analytic construal of the implication. For if OIC is theorem of logic then it surely must hold analytically.

27. The field of deontic logic is vast and intricate; I shall not pretend to mastery of it here. I confine my attention to two specific examples of deontic proofs of OIC. The first is drawn from the system known as Standard Deontic Logic (SDL); the second is inspired by the so-called Anderson-Kanger deontic reductions. Although my survey here is anything but exhaustive, I believe that these two examples are themselves exemplary, and may allow us to hazard some tentative conclusions about the family of proofs to which they belong.

28. One elementary observation about deontic terms is that they seem to admit of interdefinability. Indeed, the particular way in which they are interdefinable has itself provided part of the impetus to deontic logic. For permission and obligation seem to admit of interdefinition in much the same way that possibility and necessity are interdefined in modal logic. A particular action is obligatory for me if and only if it is *not* permissible for me *not* to perform it. And conversely an action is permitted for me if and only if it is not obligatory that I not perform it. We can see the formal symmetry with modal logic in the following pairs of biconditionals:

Modal Biconditionals	Deontic Biconditionals
$\Box p \leftrightarrow \sim \Diamond \sim p$	$OBp \leftrightarrow \sim PE \sim p$
$\Diamond p \leftrightarrow \sim \Box \sim p$	$PEp \leftrightarrow \sim OB \sim p$

Note that in this symbolic representation OBp represents the claim ‘It is obligatory that p ’, while PEp represents ‘It is permissible that p .’ In light of these biconditionals we can then treat obligatoriness as a primitive notion and define permissibility in terms of it:

$$PEp =_{\text{DEF}} \sim OB \sim p$$

This definition embodies a first fundamental insight of deontic logic: I am obliged to do what I am *not* permitted *not* to do – and conversely.

29. In order to get further, however, we must introduce the axiomatization that is to govern the use of these new logical operators. Axiomatizations of Standard Deontic Logic are (alas) not fully standardized, but the core strategy remains the same across the varieties. The basic idea is to build SDL on the back of ordinary propositional logic by introducing OB and PE as sentential operators. Accordingly, we stipulate that OBp and PEp are well-formed formulae of SDL wherever p is a well-formed formula of propositional calculus. We can then introduce the following set of axioms and rules:

A0 All tautologies of the propositional calculus

A1 $PEp \leftrightarrow \sim OB \sim p$

A2 $OB(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (OBp \rightarrow OBq)$

A3 $OBp \rightarrow PEp$

Rule 1 (modus ponens): if p and $p \rightarrow q$ then q

Rule 2 (OB-necessitation): if $\vdash p$ then OBp

Axiom A0 here reflects the origins of SDL in alethic propositional logic; in effect it serves to import all the tautologies of the propositional calculus as tautologies of SDL. Axiom A1 reflects our definition of permissibility in terms of obligation.¹² Axiom A2 allows for the distribution of obligations across conditional formulas. Axiom A3 stipulates that anything obligatory is itself permissible; this is

¹² Some versions of SDL make do with a single deontic operator. For such axiomatizations A1 is dispensable.

sometimes known as the “No Conflicts” axiom. The first of the two rules is simply *modus ponens*; the second (OB-necessitation) stipulates that if p is a theorem of propositional calculus then OBp is a theorem of SDL.¹³

30. We shall have occasion to return to consider the merits and motivations for some of these principles. But for now the next step is to trace out their consequences – in particular the consequence of the definition of permission (A1) taken together with the No Conflicts axiom (A3). If we exploit the definition in order to effect a substitution in A3 we obtain the following:

$$OBp \rightarrow \sim OB\sim p$$

Already from this it should be clear that we are in the vicinity of a certain restricted version of the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can.’ For in effect this result shows that there can be no obligations to do what is *logically* impossible. Formally:

$$\sim OB(p \ \& \ \sim p)$$

This latter formulation can be derived in SDL by the following proof:

	$:\ \sim OB(p \ \& \ \sim p)$
Suppose 1) $OB(p \ \& \ \sim p)$	assumption for RAA
2) $(p \ \& \ \sim p) \rightarrow p$	by axiom A0
3) $OB((p \ \& \ \sim p) \rightarrow p)$	OB necessitation, 2
4) $OB(p \ \& \ \sim p) \rightarrow OBp$	substitution instance of A2, 2
5) OBp	<i>modus ponens</i> , 1, 4
6) PEp	by axiom A3, 5
7) $\sim OB\sim p$	by axiom A1, 6
8) $(p \ \& \ \sim p) \rightarrow \sim p$	by axiom A0
9) $OB((p \ \& \ \sim p) \rightarrow \sim p)$	OB necessitation, 8
10) $OB(p \ \& \ \sim p) \rightarrow OB\sim p$	substitution instance of A2, 9
11) $OB\sim p$	<i>modus ponens</i> , 1, 10
12) $OB\sim p \ \& \ \sim OB\sim p$	& Intro, 7, 11
13) $\sim OB(p \ \& \ \sim p)$	RAA, 1,12
	$\vdash \sim OB(p \ \& \ \sim p)$

31. As far I can tell, this is as close as SDL allows us to get to what deontic logicians call “Kant’s Law” (the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’). The derived result tells us that if it is *logically*

¹³ The particular axiomatization I propose here is a variant of what Åqvist proposes as OK^+ . (Lennart Åqvist, “Deontic Logic”, in Gabbay and Guenther (eds.) *The Handbook of Philosophical Logic*, Vol. II, 605-714; see in particular p 615.) McNamara has proposed a slightly different axiomatization, using only one operator and three axioms (A0, A2 and a variant of A3). See Paul McNamara, “Deontic Logic”, in Gabbay and Woods (eds.) *Handbook of the History of Logic, Vol. 7: Logic and the Modalities in the Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Press, 2004), 197-288; see p. 207. A version of McNamara’s article appears as the entry for “Deontic Logic” in the online *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*.

impossible that p then it cannot be the case that it is obligatory that p . So, conversely, if p is obligatory then p must *not* be logically impossible. ‘Ought’ implies ‘logically can’. Call this OILC.

32. We shall have to return to consider the significance of the difference between OIC and OILC. But for now we should take notice of an important limitation of the SDL proof of Kant’s Law. As we have seen, the axioms and rules of SDL enable us to establish that no contradictory state of affairs is obligatory for us: $\sim\text{OB}(p \ \& \ \sim p)$. But when we elaborate this by speaking of possibility or impossibility then we are deploying modal notions that lack symbolic representation in SDL. Recall that SDL was formulated by adding deontic operators onto propositional logic. Although its apparatus was inspired by analogies with modal logic, modal terms such as necessity and possibility are not included within SDL itself. Here it is important to appreciate that both OIC and OILC are principles that cross the boundary between deontic and modal notions: *deontically* ought implies *modally* can. Such a principle cannot even be expressed, much less proved, in the language of SDL. It will thus be worthwhile to consider a second form of deontic logic that can overcome this limitation.

33. The second deontic proof I wish to consider here is due to Arthur Prior. In a brief Appendix to the published version of his 1956 John Locke lectures, Prior proposed a proof of OIC.¹⁴ The background for Prior’s proof is found in a striking proposal made simultaneously and independently by Alan Ross Anderson and Stig Kanger. In a 1956 technical report for the US Navy, Anderson, who was a sociologist by training, proposed a strategy for reducing deontic to ordinary modal logic.¹⁵ Kanger was circulating a paper informally at about the same time, although it was not formally published until 1971.¹⁶ The watershed for this so-called “Anderson-Kanger” programme was a celebrated four-page paper in *Mind* in which Anderson proposed a formal proof of his reduction.¹⁷

34. At the core of Anderson’s proposal was an idiosyncratic definition of $\text{OB}p$:

$$\text{OB}p =_{\text{DEF}} \Box(\sim p \rightarrow \mathcal{P})$$

As above, $\text{OB}p$ should be read to represent the claim that it is obligatory that p . \Box is the modal operator for necessity; \mathcal{P} figures here as a sentential or propositional constant. Formally, the crucial breakthrough here is to propose a treatment of obligatoriness that draws strictly on the resources of ordinary alethic modal logic. For Anderson, to say that p is obligatory is to say that, necessarily, if p *does not* obtain then the propositional constant is true. In his formal presentation of this proposal, Anderson left his sentential constant strategically unspecified. But there is no shortage of proposals as

¹⁴ Arthur Prior, “Modal and Deontic Logic”, Appendix D of *Time and Modality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 140-145.

¹⁵ Alan Ross Anderson, “The Formal Analysis of Normative Concepts”, Technical Report No. 2, U.S. Office of Naval Research, Group Psychology Branch, Contract No. SAR/Nonr-609 (16), 1956. The report was later published in *American Sociological Review* 22 (1957), 9-17.

¹⁶ Stig Kanger, “New Foundations for Ethical Theory”, in Hilpinen (ed.) *Deontic Logic: Introductory and Systematic Readings* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1971), 36-58.

¹⁷ Alan Ross Anderson, “A Reduction of Deontic Logic to Alethic Modal Logic”, *Mind* 67 (1958), 100-103.

to how it should be interpreted. Anderson himself seemed to think his constant in terms of liability to punishment or sanction; Prior explains it as follows:

[The sentential constant] may be read as ‘The world will be worse off’, ‘Punishment ought to follow’, or something of that sort.¹⁸

Nowadays deontic logicians tend to treat \mathcal{P} as the claim that some unspecified Bad Thing obtains.

Accordingly, we can think of Anderson’s definition as telling us that some state of affairs is obligatory if, necessarily, its non-occurrence brings with it the Bad Thing. An analogous definition is then available for permissibility:

$$PEp =_{\text{DEF}} \diamond(p \ \& \ \sim\mathcal{P})$$

That is, some state of affairs is permissible if it is possible that it obtains even while the Bad Thing does not!

34. The issues raised by the Anderson-Kanger reduction are legion. But once again our immediate task is to consider the resources it provides for the deontic treatment of OIC. This was Prior’s contribution. In considering his proof, we can begin from his analog of Axiom A3 in SDL. According to that axiom, recall, obligation entails permissibility: $(OBp \rightarrow PEp)$. Drawing on Anderson’s definitions, Prior then substitutes for OBp and PEp as follows:

$$\Box(\sim p \rightarrow \mathcal{P}) \rightarrow \diamond(p \ \& \ \sim\mathcal{P})$$

Formally, the great advantage of these substitutions is that we now have no need for any further distinctively deontic axioms or rules. For here we have a formula that is expressed in strictly modal terms. We can thus churn away at this formula using the resources of modal logic. To be sure, modal logic is subject to its own controversies, but the modal resources required for Prior’s proof are as modest and uncontroversial as anything in this hotly contested domain. Essentially, Prior’s proof requires that we are allowed to distribute the possibility operator across the conjunction that figures here in the consequent:

$$\diamond(p \ \& \ \sim\mathcal{P}) \rightarrow (\diamond p \ \& \ \diamond\sim\mathcal{P})$$

Using conditional proof and ampersand elimination we obtain the following conclusion:

$$\Box(\sim p \rightarrow \mathcal{P}) \rightarrow \diamond p$$

With Anderson’s reduction we can now retranslate this result back in a deontic idiom:

$$OBp \rightarrow \diamond p$$

That is, if p is obligatory then p is possible. With this we now have a more fully elaborated statement of Kant’s Law, one that captures its characteristic crossing from a deontic antecedent to a modal consequent. Here is an attempt to state the proof as a whole.¹⁹

¹⁸ Prior 1957, 140.

¹⁹ This proof is not an exact reproduction of Prior’s, which relies on a rather different proof convention. Nonetheless I believe the rendering here captures the essentials of Prior’s strategy.

$: OBp \rightarrow \diamond p$	
1) OBp	assumption for conditional proof
2) $OBp \rightarrow PEp$	axiom
3) $OBp \leftrightarrow \Box(\sim p \rightarrow \mathcal{P})$	from the definition of OB
4) $PEp \leftrightarrow \Diamond(p \ \& \ \sim \mathcal{P})$	from the definition of PE
5) $\Box(\sim p \rightarrow \mathcal{P}) \rightarrow \Diamond(p \ \& \ \sim \mathcal{P})$	substituting 3 and 4 in 2
6) $\Diamond(p \ \& \ \sim \mathcal{P}) \rightarrow (\Diamond p \ \& \ \Diamond \sim \mathcal{P})$	derived rule of modal logic
7) $\Box(\sim p \rightarrow \mathcal{P})$	\leftrightarrow elimination, 2, 6
8) $\Diamond(p \ \& \ \sim \mathcal{P})$	<i>modus ponens</i> , 4, 7
9) $\Diamond p \ \& \ \Diamond \sim \mathcal{P}$	<i>modus ponens</i> , 5, 8
10) $\Diamond p$	& elimination, 9
11) $OBp \rightarrow \Diamond p$	conditional proof, 5,8
$\vdash OBp \rightarrow \Diamond p$	

35. Having seen two examples of the deontic treatment of OIC, we are now in a position to consider their import for the questions we have been considering. Do they establish the soundness of OIC? Do they yield an analytic interpretation of the implication? And finally, what room (if any) do they leave for the possibility of the forms of infinite moral consciousness that were our original concern? In thinking about these questions I shall confine myself to two observations.

36. The first point is to remind ourselves of what we have already observed, viz., that the conclusion established by these deontic proofs is at most a version of OILC (ought implies *logically* can), which is relatively weak version of OIC (ought implies can). In the case of the SDL proof, the most that was established was that we are never obligated to bring about something that involves a *logical* contradiction. In the case of Prior's proof, OBp implied $\diamond p$, but the diamond operator marks the possibility of modal logic, so the possibility is once again only logical. I think it is safe to say that OILC is not the principle that people have in mind when they typically invoke OIC. The easiest way to see this is to return to the two uses of OIC we distinguished above. Consider first the "Whew!" applications – the cases where I invoke OIC in order to limit the scope of my obligations. Here, it should be clear, OILC is virtually worthless. All it tells me is that I don't have an obligation to do something that is logically impossible. We can perhaps be thankful for that, but it still leaves open the possibility that, e.g., we might be obliged to end world hunger by lunchtime, or indeed to live the life of Christ – provided we think that the obstacles to such accomplishments are physical, psychological, economic, geographic, ... -- anything but logical impossibility. If OILC were all that set the bounds of my duties then my duties would be effectively unlimited. For my purposes this is crucial, as it shows that deontic logic leaves plenty of scope for forms of infinite moral consciousness.

37. But suppose we are interested in the capacity expanding (“Wow!”) applications instead. Does OILC fare any better? I think not. Consider again the case of our soldier, certain of his duties but wondering whether he is capable of carrying them through. What kind of reassurance would OILC offer in such a circumstance? Only the cold comfort that the successful execution of his duties is not *logically* impossible. If he fails to do his duty it will not be because there was a formal contradiction in his orders. That this is not much by way of reassurance reflects the intrinsic weakness of OILC. Indeed it is hard to imagine a circumstance where OILC could provide any comfort at all. The soldier would never have been *uncertain* about his ability to carry out his mission if the demands upon his action involved a logical contradiction.

38. But if OILC offers us only a very thin gruel, the deontic proofs buy it at a very high price. This is my second observation. Here is where we must return to consider the basis for the axioms and rules upon which the deontic proofs rely. It is crucial to appreciate, first, that both the SDL proof and Prior’s proof rely on the common assumption that whatever is obligatory is permissible ($OBp \rightarrow PEp$). This is an axiom that may attract initial intuitive support. What a cruel thing morality would be if it did not permit me to perform the actions it deems obligatory! Nonetheless this so-called ‘No Conflicts’ axiom is controversial, and has been fiercely disputed, particularly in the debates over the possibility and structure of moral dilemmas and moral tragedies. If Antigone finds herself subject to two absolute yet inconsistent obligations, then it is simply not the case that, for her, OBp entails PEp . The whole structure of her situation is such that she is not permitted to do what she finds herself obligated to do. It seems odd, to say the least, to think that her tragedy is the product of a *logical* error! Accordingly, it is problematic if deontic logical systems simply erase her story by axiomatic fiat.

39. But the problem about the No Conflicts axiom is really just the visible tip of a much larger problem with the axioms on which our deontic proofs have relied. I said at the outset that deontic logic aims to articulate the meaning of ‘ought’ in the same way that ordinary alethic logic systematically articulates the meaning of ‘not’ or ‘if and only if.’ If deontic logic could succeed at this task, and if a version of OIC emerged as a theorem, we would indeed have a vindication of the claim that OIC is an analytic truth. But the axiomatizations of deontic logic that have yielded our proofs of OIC simply do not remain true to that ambition. Take two examples, which could easily be multiplied. As we have seen, Axiom A3 of SDL stipulates that any logical truth yields an obligation. Axiom A1 helps itself to the notion of an obligatory conditional. Are these axioms that articulate the meaning of ‘ought’? Do we even know what it would mean to say that we have an obligation to bring about a logical tautology? The dark truth is that these axioms are not in fact rooted in the meaning of ‘ought’ at all. Their actual origin becomes evident when we lay them alongside their modal cousins. The modal analog of the No Conflicts axiom, for instance, is the principle that necessity implies possibility ($\Box p \rightarrow \Diamond p$). This makes obvious intuitive sense: if it is necessary that p (if p is true in every possible world) then it must at least be possible that p (p is true in some possible world). The same pattern holds in the case of the other axioms. If a conditional statement is necessary (holds true in all possible worlds) then if the

antecedent is necessary the consequent must be necessary too (Axiom A1). If a certain proposition is a logical truth then it is also a necessary truth (Axiom A3). As is so often the case with formal systems, success in one domain inspired applications to another. And since obligation indeed seems to be a kind of practical necessitation, the axioms of standard modal logic became the axioms of standard deontic logic. But in the process, as Husserl warned, the connection to the world was lost. The axioms of standard deontic logic no more capture the meaning of 'ought' than the rules of the propositional calculus capture the meaning of 'if ... then'.

40. The survey undertaken in the foregoing remarks has been partial and provisional, so my conclusions must accordingly be provisional as well. We have reviewed three lines of argument in support of OIC. The one which would make OIC an analytic principle has not withstood scrutiny; the other two arguments have both lent support for a synthetic inference from 'ought' to 'can'. In each case the synthesis turned on considerations about the *use* or *function* of 'ought'-claims, whether in circumstances of deliberation or in prescriptive speech acts. This suggests that a certain space may in principle remain for the forms of infinite or impossible obligations that have been my concern. For such infinite forms of moral consciousness would not be ruled out by OIC *if* the use of infinite obligations lay outside the domain of uses upon which the two synthetic arguments turn.

41. Here it may be useful to return briefly to the case of Martin Luther. As we have seen, Luther rejected the inference from 'ought' to 'can', insisting that we are subject to divinely imposed obligations that we can never hope to fulfill. So how would Luther's position fare when confronted with the arguments we have considered? From what we have learned here, it would seem that everything will turn on the specific use or function that Luther envisions for God's unfulfillable commands. By way of conclusion, then, allow me to introduce one piece of evidence pertinent to this problem.

42. Issues concerning 'ought' and 'can' figured centrally in one of Luther's most famous (and bitter) public quarrels: his dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam over freedom of the will. In his *Diatribes* against Luther's determinism, Erasmus had invoked a range of arguments, one of which turns on an implicit appeal to OIC. Erasmus cites an array of Biblical texts in which one or another character is placed, as Erasmus puts it, *in bivio* – at the crossroads of choice. In each of these cases God issues a specific command, as for instance to Adam not to eat the apple, or to Cain to choose good rather than evil. For Erasmus the lesson is clear: these Biblical stories provide a theological proof that man is free to choose; otherwise it would make no sense to place man at the crossroads of choice, issued with a divine command. Here is an example of Erasmus' reasoning:

God said to Moses: 'I have set before your face the way of life and the way of death. Choose the good and walk in it.' What could be put more plainly? God shows what is good, what is evil, shows the different rewards of life and death, leaves man freedom to choose. It would be ridiculous to say, 'Choose,' if the power of turning one way or another were not present, as though one should say to a man standing at

the crossroad: ‘You see these two roads, take which you like’ ... when only one was open to him.²⁰

I hope it is clear that Erasmus’ argument here bears a close resemblance to the synthetic arguments we have been considering. It turns on a consideration of the circumstance of imperatival speech, and it purports to find an absurdity (‘it would be ridiculous ...’) in the issuing of commands that cannot be followed.

43. Luther’s reply to Erasmus is instructive. He insists, first of all, that the Biblical passages Erasmus cites are one-and-all imperatives, telling man what he must do, not what he can do. Here’s Luther, in a characteristically feisty mood:

[B]y the words of the law man is warned and instructed as to what he ought to do, not what he is able to do. ... This is something that even grammarians and street urchins know, that by verbs of the imperative mood nothing else is signified but what ought to be done. What is done, or can be done, must be expressed by indicative verbs.²¹

But what about Erasmus’ *reductio* argument? Wouldn’t it be absurd for God to issue commands that cannot be followed? On this point Luther answers Erasmus head-on:

The inference tacked on by that dilettante Diatribe, however, concludes: Therefore man is able to do such things, otherwise they would be commanded in vain. The answer is this: Madam Diatribe, your reasoning is bad and you do not prove your conclusion, but in your blindness and carelessness you only imagine that this follows and is proved. The commandments are neither inappropriate nor purposeless, but are given in order that blind, self-confident man may through them come to know his own diseased state of impotence if he attempts to do what is commanded.²²

I cannot here try to plumb the complexities of the debate between Erasmus and Luther. But already with this slice of their dispute we can see a limitation of the synthetic version of OIC, and indeed a specific lacuna in Hare’s defense of it. Hare’s argument depended on a crucial assumption about prescriptive speech acts: the assumption that their function is to produce the behaviour that is commanded. It is only relative to this function that the issuing of impossible commands, as Hare puts it, “will not do.” Hare’s assumption may seem plausible, even obvious, but Luther explicitly rejects it. On his account, impossible obligations and infinite ideals serve an entirely different purpose: to teach the one commanded something about his nature, or (as I would prefer to put it) about his ontological constitution. Luther: “It would not be ridiculous, but a matter of due seriousness, to say to a man standing at the crossroad, ‘Take which way you like,’ if he was either inclined to imagine himself strong when he was weak, or was contending that neither road was closed.”²³

44. In tracing out the arguments over ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, we have thus managed to identify one possible configuration of infinite moral consciousness. To find myself subject to an infinite demand

²⁰ Erasmus, “On the Freedom of the Will” (*De libero arbitrio*, 1524); translation by Rupp and Marlow in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 54. The Biblical source Erasmus cites is from Deuteronomy, ch. 30.

²¹ Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will” (*De servo arbitrio*, 1525); translation by Rupp and Marlow in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 190.

²² Luther 1525; English translation p. 191.

²³ Luther 1525; English translation p. 189-90.

may not directly help me in deciding what to do; but it might nonetheless serve a normative function in telling me where I stand, and so in understanding something about the kind of being I am. Whether and how this insight might be transposed out of the specific theological setting in which Luther articulates it is a question I propose to leave for discussion.