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Published in:
Philosophy

DOI:
[10.1007/s11406-018-0042-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-018-0042-2)

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Streumer, B. (2019). I Ought to Reply, So I Can. *Philosophy*, 47(5), 1547-1554.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-018-0042-2>

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I Ought to Reply, So I Can

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Received: 5 March 2018 / Revised: 9 September 2018 / Accepted: 23 October 2018 /
Published online: 15 November 2018
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Abstract

I have elsewhere given three arguments for the claim that there can be a reason for a person to perform an action only if this person can perform this action. Henne, Semler, Chituc, De Brigard, and Sinnott-Armstrong make several objections to my arguments. I here respond to their objections.

Keywords Ought implies can · Reason implies can · Ought · Reason · Ability

I have elsewhere given three arguments for the claim that

(R) There can be a reason for a person to perform an action only if this person can perform this action,

where by ‘reason’ I mean normative reason.¹ These arguments may also show that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’: in other words, they may also show that

(O) It can be true that a person ought to perform an action only if this person can perform this action.

In a recent paper in this journal, Henne, Semler, Chituc, De Brigard, and Sinnott-Armstrong make several objections to my arguments.² I think I ought to reply. And I think I can.

¹In other words, by ‘reason’ I mean a consideration that counts in favour of this person’s performing this action and that this person should take into account in rational deliberation. That is what I will mean by ‘reason’ throughout this reply.

²See Henne, Semler et al. (2018). Henne, Semler et al. present my arguments as arguments for (O).

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1 The Argument from Crazy Reasons

My first argument was what I called the *argument from crazy reasons*.³ Suppose Jane is a normal human being, and suppose someone says that

- (1) There is a reason for Jane to travel back in time to prevent the crusades, slavery, and the two world wars.

If by ‘reason’ we mean normative reason, (1) is clearly false. (R) explains why: because Jane cannot travel back in time to prevent the crusades, slavery, and the two world wars. If you reject (R) but agree that (1) is false, you will need to propose a different restriction on the existence of reasons that ensures that (1) is false. You could, for example, propose the following restriction:

There can only be a reason for a person to perform an action if this person does not have to travel back in time in order to perform this action.

But someone could then make further claims about crazy reasons, such as:

- (2) There is a reason for Jane to travel to the other side of the world within thirty seconds to prevent an imminent plane crash,
- (3) There is a reason for Jane to develop medicines against all known diseases by the end of the week.

If you reject (R) but agree that (2) and (3) are false as well, you will then need to propose further restrictions on the existence of reasons, without there being an obvious stopping point. Moreover, what unifies and explains your ever-expanding list of restrictions seems to be (R). That suggests that instead of endorsing this ever-expanding list, you should simply endorse (R).

Henne, Semler et al. reject what I say about (1): they think that Jane *does* have a reason to travel back in time and prevent slavery.⁴ Why do they think this? They write:

People alive during slavery, we can assume, had reasons to prevent it. Consider now that Jane somehow became able to prevent slavery and did prevent it – for instance, by traveling back in time. Given this hypothetical, it would be wrong to claim that she acted without reason.

But this is compatible with (R): for all (R) says, *if* Jane became able to travel back in time and prevent slavery, there *would be* a reason for her to do this. Moreover, (R) allows that if Jane became able to do this and then did it, she would not be acting for no

³ My summaries of my arguments in this reply mostly follow Streumer 2017, pp. 155–69. Henne, Semler et al. (2018) focus on Streumer 2007. My most comprehensive defence of the arguments is Streumer 2018.

⁴ Henne, Semler et al. (2018) actually just say that “Jane has a reason to prevent slavery”, not that she has a reason to *travel back in time* and prevent slavery. But since the latter reason is what (1) is about, I will take them to mean that Jane has a reason to travel back in time and prevent slavery.

reason. What (R) denies is only that there *actually is* a reason for Jane to travel back in time and prevent slavery.

Henne, Semler et al. consider this response, but suggest that it begs the question. They write that

one could think that Jane’s reason to prevent slavery only comes about when she suddenly becomes able to perform the action by traveling through time. But there is no basis for denying that Jane has a reason to prevent slavery before she becomes able other than to defend [(R)] . . . This assumption, however, begs the question in this context.⁵

But this gets the argument from crazy reasons the wrong way around. The argument does not aim to show that (1) is false. Instead, it *assumes* that claims like (1), (2), and (3) are false, and aims to show that (R) is true by showing that (R) is the simplest explanation of the falsity of such claims. If Henne, Semler et al. really think that claims like (1), (2) and (3) can be true, the argument will have no force for them. But if we use ‘reason’ to mean normative reason, I do not think many people will agree with them that claims like (1), (2) and (3) can be true.

2 The Argument from Tables and Chairs

My second argument was what I called the *argument from tables and chairs*. Since tables and chairs cannot perform actions, there are no reasons for tables and chairs to perform any action whatsoever. When a person cannot perform an action, this person is in the same position with regard to *this* action that tables and chairs are in with regard to *all* actions. This suggests that just as there are no reasons for tables and chairs to perform any action whatsoever, there is no reason for this person to perform this action. In other words, it suggests that (R) is true.

Henne, Semler et al. object that this argument is “circular”, since it “assumes that [(R) is true] to assert that the reason for a table’s lack of reason is the inability to act”. But they here ignore my discussion of several alternative explanations of the non-existence of reasons for tables and chairs: for example, I argued that this cannot be explained by claiming that

- (1) There can be a reason for an entity to perform an action only if entities of this kind can perform actions

or by claiming that

- (2) There can be a reason for an entity to perform an action only if this entity can have beliefs about reasons.⁶

⁵ Here and in other quotes from Henne, Semler et al.’s paper, I have substituted ‘(R)’ for “‘ought’ implies ‘can’”. As I said in note 2, Henne, Semler et al. interpret my arguments as arguments for (O).

⁶ See Streumer 2007, pp. 362–5, 2017, pp. 160–1, 2018, pp. 237–9.

Henne, Semler et al. also suggest an alternative explanation: they say that the argument

suffers from a false analogy between humans and furniture. Tables are not moral agents because they lack intentions, rationality and many more features that explain why tables do not have any reasons to do anything. Humans, on the other hand, have reasons to do things – even if they cannot do them.

In other words, they suggest that what explains the non-existence of reasons for tables and chairs is not (R), but is instead that

- (3) There can be a reason for an entity to perform an action only if this entity is rational and has intentions.

Suppose, however, that Kate is irreversibly paralyzed but is still rational and still has intentions. If (3) were true but (R) were false, there could then be reasons for her to perform very many actions. But Kate cannot actually *perform* any of these actions. Why would whether there are reasons for her to perform these actions depend only on whether she is rational and has intentions? It seems much more plausible to say that this also depends on whether she can actually perform these actions.⁷

Henne, Semler et al. also make a surprising claim about dead people. They write:

Ought Julius Caesar run for Congress in 2018? Supporters of the . . . argument would claim that, because of the truth of [(R)], a dead person has no reason to perform acts because he is unable to perform them. But . . . [if] Caesar is still granted the status of personhood, then he is comparable to a living human. If this Caesar somehow arose from the dead and ran for Congress, we would not claim that he is acting without reason. So, Caesar does have a reason to run for Congress in 2018.⁸

If agree that if Caesar rose from the dead, there would perhaps be a reason for him to run for Congress in 2018. I also agree that if Caesar rose from the dead and ran for Congress in 2018, he would not be acting for no reason. But this is compatible with (R). What (R) denies is only that there *actually is* a reason for Caesar to rise from the dead and run for Congress in 2018. If Henne, Semler et al. really think that there is a reason for Caesar to do this, the argument from tables and chairs may have no force for them. But if we use ‘reason’ to mean normative reason, I do not think many people will agree with them that there is a reason for Caesar to rise from the dead and run for Congress in 2018.

⁷ I am here repeating the response I give to (2) in Streumer 2017 and 2018, which I think also applies to (3).

⁸ They continue: “On the other hand, Caesar may instead be considered as lacking personhood. In this case, he is no longer a moral agent because of his death, and is, therefore, in the same position as a table or chair.” They here seem to endorse the argument from tables and chairs rather than reject it.

3 The Argument from Deliberation

My third and final argument was what I called the *argument from deliberation*. Suppose that (R) is false. In that case, whenever you deliberate about what to do, you will have to take into account not only reasons to perform actions that you can perform, but also reasons to perform actions that you cannot perform. Since the crusades, slavery, and the two world wars caused an enormous amount of suffering, you will then almost always have to conclude that there is most reason for you to travel back in time and prevent the crusades, slavery, and the two world wars. And you will then have to try to travel back in time to prevent these events. If (R) is false, rational deliberation will therefore almost always result in your trying to perform actions that you cannot perform. But rational deliberation clearly should not have such pointless results. This suggests that (R) is true.

Henne, Semler et al. object that this argument assumes that

- (1) A person who deliberates about whether to perform an action must consider all reasons for this action and for alternatives to this action.

But the argument does not assume this. It only assumes that when we deliberate about whether to perform an action, we should consider all reasons that have great weight: in other words, we should consider all reasons that are likely to outweigh most other reasons. And given how much suffering was caused by the crusades, slavery, and the two world wars, if there were reasons to prevent these events, these reasons would surely have great weight.⁹

Henne, Semler et al. also say that the argument from deliberation “suggests another argument” that assumes that

- (2) It is pointless for a person to try to perform an action that he or she cannot perform and that
- (3) If a person has most reason to perform an action that he or she cannot perform, then this person should try to perform this action.

They object to (2) that “it is not always pointless to try to do what one cannot do, even if one knows one cannot do it”. I agree. But my argument does not assume that (2) is true: instead, it only assumes that it would be pointless to try to travel back in time to prevent the crusades, slavery, and the two world wars. It is hard to deny that this would be pointless.

Henne, Semler et al. are right that my argument assumes that (3) is true. But suppose we denied (3): suppose we said that

- (4) A person should try to perform an action only if he or she can perform this action.

⁹ Henne, Semler et al. also discuss an alternative reconstruction of the argument that makes it assume that if (O) “is false, deliberation cannot ever be rational”. I do not see how the argument is supposed to assume this.

If (4) is true, the only reasons that can make a difference to the result of rational deliberation are reasons to perform actions that we can perform. In that case, why should we think that there are *also* reasons to perform actions that we *cannot* perform? If a consideration cannot make a difference to the result of rational deliberation, it does not seem to be a reason at all. I therefore think that endorsing (4) is not a plausible way to resist the argument from deliberation.

4 Survey Results

In two other papers, Henne, Chituc, De Brigard, and Sinnott-Armstrong present survey results that seem to show that many people do not accept (O).¹⁰ I will briefly discuss these results and their relation to my arguments.

Survey participants were presented with the following story:

Adams promises to meet his friend Brown for lunch at noon today. It takes Adams thirty minutes to drive from his house to the place where they plan to eat lunch together. . . . Adams decides that he does not want to have lunch with Brown after all, so he stays at his house until eleven forty-five. Because of where he is at that time, Adams cannot meet his friend Brown at noon, as he promised.¹¹

Henne et al. report that 60% of participants judged that in this story Adams ought to keep his promise “even when they knew he was unable to do it”.¹² They note that Buckwalter and Turri conducted similar surveys and obtained even stronger results: for example, when participants were presented with a version of this story in which Adams promises to meet Brown but then becomes physically unable to meet him because of a car accident, 80% of them judged that Adams nevertheless ought to keep his promise.¹³

The story in Henne et al.’s survey is a case of self-imposed inability: it is a case in which someone ought to perform an action but then makes it impossible for him- or herself to perform this action. Some philosophers take such cases to be counterexamples to (O).¹⁴ But defenders of (O) take such cases to show that (O) should be interpreted as indexed to time: using ‘ t_1 ’ and ‘ t_2 ’ to refer to any two subsequent points in time, they take (O) to be equivalent to the claim that

¹⁰ See Chituc et al. 2016 and Henne et al. 2016.

¹¹ See Chituc et al. 2016, p. 21, and Henne et al. 2016, p. 285. The survey also included a different story: see note 13 below.

¹² Henne et al. 2016, p. 285.

¹³ Buckwalter and Turri 2015, p. 4. In their version of the story Adams is called ‘Walter’. Interestingly, Chituc et al.’s survey also included a variant of this story, but they found that 68% of participants denied that the agent ought to keep his promise (see Henne et al. 2016, p. 285, and Chituc et al. 2016, p. 21). Their results therefore partly contradict Buckwalter and Turri’s results (though only in low-blame conditions).

¹⁴ See White 1975, p. 149, and Sinnott-Armstrong 1984. Heuer 2010, p. 237, takes such cases to be counterexamples to (R).

(O*) It can be true at t_1 that a person ought to perform an action at t_2 only if this person can at t_1 perform this action at t_2 .¹⁵

Since it takes Adams thirty minutes to drive from his house to the place where he has promised to meet Brown, (O*) says that after 11.30 it is no longer true that Adams ought to meet Brown there at 12.00. But if you reject (O*), you cannot plausibly say that it *never* ceases to be true that Adams ought to meet Brown there at 12.00.¹⁶ Instead, you will presumably say that this ceases to be true after 12.00, since after 12.00 Adams can only meet Brown there at 12.00 by changing the past. But since it takes Adams thirty minutes to drive to the place where he has promised to meet Brown, by remaining in his house after 11.30 it is *already true after 11.30* that Adams can only meet Brown there at 12.00 by changing the past. This suggests that the time at which it ceases to be true that there is a reason for Adams to meet Brown there is 11.30 rather than 12.00, exactly as (O*) says.

Moreover, (O*) allows that after 11.30 the following claims are still true:

Adams ought to *have met* Brown at 12.00.¹⁷

Adams ought not to have made himself unable to meet Brown at 12.00.

Since Adams ought to have met Brown at 12.00 and ought not to have made himself unable to meet Brown at 12.00, Adams is blameworthy for not having met Brown at 12.00.

Since (O*) allows that after 11.30 these claims are still true, and since any plausible view has to say that there is *some* time at which it ceases to be true that Adams ought to meet Brown at 12.00, this case does not refute (O*). And the same applies to (R*): if we take (R) to be equivalent to the claim that

(R*) There can be a reason at t_1 for a person to perform an action at t_2 only if this person can at t_1 perform this action at t_2 ,

cases of self-imposed inability do not refute (R*) either.¹⁸

As both Kurthy, Lawford-Smith and Sousa and Leben note, what explains why many participants in Buckwalter and Turri's surveys chose answers that seem to contradict (O) may be that they were not presented with answers that were indexed to time the way (O*) is indexed to time.¹⁹ When Kurthy et al. and Leben conducted surveys in which participants were presented with such answers, participants' responses were in line with (O*).

¹⁵ See Zimmerman 1996, pp. 97–100, Haji 2002, pp. 47–9, Streumer 2003, Howard-Snyder 2006, pp. 235–6, and Vranas 2007, pp. 175–82.

¹⁶ See Vranas 2007, pp. 176–7, and p. 201 n. 10.

¹⁷ I here assume that 'Adams ought to have met Brown' is the past tense of 'Adams ought to meet Brown' (though 'Adams ought to have met Brown' perhaps also pragmatically conveys that Adams did not in fact meet Brown).

¹⁸ See Streumer 2010, 2017, pp. 164–66, and 2018.

¹⁹ See Kurthy et al. 2017 and Leben 2018. Leben adds that the answers also do not control for ordering effects. An additional complication is that 'ought' does not have a straightforward past tense, which may confuse our responses to such stories: see Streumer 2003, pp. 223–4.

5 Conclusion

I conclude that Henne, Semler et al.'s objections fail to undermine my arguments for (R), and that Henne et al.'s survey results do not show that people reject (O) if this claim is taken to be equivalent to (O*). I therefore continue to think that (R) and (O) are true.²⁰

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²⁰ For helpful comments on a previous draft I am grateful to an anonymous referee and to the editor of this journal.