BEYOND OUGHT-IMPLIES-CAN:
IMPERSONAL OBLIGATORINESS
IMPLIES HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY[*]

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Abstract. I argue first that some propositions are obligatory without being obligatory for anyone (i.e., they are *impersonally* obligatory): if each of us has promised to vote and thus has an obligation to vote, then it is obligatory (i.e., morally required) that we all vote, but it is not obligatory *for anyone* that we all vote (because, for example, what is obligatory for you is that *you* vote, not that we *all* vote). I argue next that "ought-implies-can" fails for *impersonal* obligatoriness: if each of us has promised to (and can) finish first in a given race and thus it is impersonally obligatory that we all finish first (i.e., that we all finish at the same time), it does not follow that anyone (or we) can make it the case that we all finish first (we may be unable to coordinate). I defend instead the following principle: if a proposition is (impersonally) obligatory—or forbidden—at time *t*, then it is *historically contingent* at *t* (i.e., both the proposition and its negation are logically compatible with the history of the world up to and including *t*).

1. Introduction

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2. 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 *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.)

[1] (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 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 2018b: 495 n. 15). (2) Although I consider only *moral* obligatoriness in this paper, my points also apply to other kinds of obligatoriness (legal, prudential, epistemic, etc.). (3) 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). (4) 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.

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* (contrast Vranas 2018a: 17 n. 39), 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* (see Vranas 2018a: 4) 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 (see, e.g., Liberman & Schroeder 2016: 107) 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*

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[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 2013: 13; Hintikka 1971: 60; Krogh & Herrestad 1996: 135; McNamara 2004a: 121, 2006/2019; Rönnedal 2009: 58; cf. Ross 2010: 307), whereas "agential" obligatoriness is sometimes understood in the literature as the obligatoriness of *actions* or of propositions related to actions (see McNamara 2004a: 121, 2006/2019; Vranas 2018a: 6–7 n. 15; contrast Chrisman 2012: 436; Estlund 2020: 171; Price 2008: 46–7, 50). (Arguably, obligatoriness does not always apply to actions: see Broome 2012: 252–4, 2013: 16–8; McNamara 2004a: 121–3; Vranas 2018a: 6; Wedgwood 2006: 131–7; contrast Schroeder 2011: 24–33.)

[3] A *personal* obligation can be defined either as an obligation whose satisfaction proposition is *personally* obligatory or, equivalently, as an *owned* obligation (cf. Broome 2012: 256–8, 2013: 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 Wringe 2005: 197, 2010: 219; cf. Wedgwood 2006: 128) might also want to deny (1), but then they would need to rebut my arguments for (1).

[4] See Goble 2009: 457; cf. Williams 1981: 118. (See Horty 2001: 57–8 for a possible objection; for replies, see Broersen & van der Torre 2003: 55; Danielsson 2002: 410; McNamara 2004b: 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

that whatever is obligatory 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, doesn't it 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. (See Krogh & Herrestad 1996: 145–6 for another example.)

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 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

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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 all-things-considered obligatory that *you* win the prize). (For a related example, see Broome 2012: 260–3, 2013: 19–20.)

[5] In the literature, "impersonal" obligatoriness is sometimes understood as what I call "obligatoriness simpliciter" (see McNamara 2004a: 120) and other times understood as non-agential (see note 2) obligatoriness simpliciter (see Krogh & Herrestad 1996: 135). I think that those uses of the term "impersonal" can lead to confusion, because on those uses whatever is personally (and non-agentially) 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 12 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 & Herrestad 1996: 138–9; cf. Broome 2013: 20–1; McNamara 2006/2019.) One can similarly argue, against Chisholm's (1964: 150) 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. On Chisholm's suggestion and similar ones, see Almotahari & Rabern 2022; Feldman 1986: 192–6; Forrester 1996: 68–73; García 1986; Geach 1982: 3–4; Harman 1986: 131–2; Hilpinen 1973: 148–9; Horty 1996: 285–90, 2001: 44–58, 2012: 68–9 n. 4; Horty & Belnap 1995: 619–28; Kordig 1975: 225–7; Krogh & Herrestad 1996: 136–45; McNamara 2006/2019; Schroeder 2011: 8–11; cf. Anderson 1962: 43; Hartmann 1926/1932: 259–60; Meinong 1917/1972: 141–2.

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).[7] 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 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).[8] 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.

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[7] 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.

[8] 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).

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 (cf. Aas 2015: 1 n. 5; Tamminga & Hindriks 2020: 1089); 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 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*.[9] 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).[10] 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 stop the mugging (cf. Blomberg & Petersson 2023; Darwall 2021). 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.)[11]

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[9] For (at least tentative) endorsements of (versions of) this claim, see Aas 2015: 14; Björnsson 2014: 111, 117; Collins 2013: 231, 239–40, 2019: 35, 60–95; Isaacs 2011: 148–9 (cf. 2014: 44–5); Lawford-Smith 2012: 458; Pinkert 2014: 188–9; Schwenkenbecher 2013: 315, 317–8, 2014: 61. For (at least implicit) rejections (based on an objection that I go on to examine in the text), see Cripps 2011; May 1990, 1992, 1998: 218; Wringe 2010: 220–4, 2014: 174–7, 2016: 484–5, 2020: 1530–2. For discussions, see Björnsson 2021: 130–4 and Schwenkenbecher 2021: 31–6.

[10] One might object by contesting my understanding of an agent as an entity that can act (cf. Helm 2008: 19; List & Pettit 2006: 87–8; Pettit 2007: 178; Wringe 2020: 1529; contrast Aas 2015: 14; Bratman 2014: 125–6; Estlund 2020: 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 2011: 144–5, 2014: 45; Wringe 2010: 221–4, 2014: 176–7, 2016: 484–5, 2020: 1531 n. 28; cf. Björnsson 2014: 109; Cripps 2011: 176–8; May 1990, 1992: 109, 122, 1998: 216–8). 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.

[11] 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 2013, 2019; cf. Held 1970: 480; Jansen 2014: 98; Lawford-Smith 2012: 458; Schwenkenbecher 2013: 317, 321–2, 2014: 62 n. 3, 2021: 117–8; contrast Estlund 2020: 356–7 n. 30). 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 2014: 187–90 (see also Björnsson 2014; Schwenkenbecher 2013, 2014, 2021). 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.

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.[12]) 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 (a) and (b) jointly entail that we both vote; see Goble 2009: 481 n. 13 for a similar example.) 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; 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*

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[12] 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 2013: 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 2013: 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 2004a: 121; cf. Broome 2012: 254, 2013: 16–8; Krogh & Herrestad 1996: 151; Vranas 2018a: 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. 2001: 40–45).

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.[13] Since it is both pro tanto obligatory and overall morally best that we both fail to pay, 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.[14] 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*

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[13] 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.

[14] 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.)

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*.[15]

The poisoning example is a moral analog of the Prisoner's Dilemma (see Campbell 1985). A common view is that the Prisoner's Dilemma "illustrates a conflict between individual and group rationality" (Kuhn 1997/2019; cf. Blomberg & Petersson 2023: §5). 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.[16] In

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[15] 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 (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).

[16] 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" (1996: 56–7; cf. Smith 1986: 342; Tomalty 2014: 5), and many other authors make similar points about "ought to be" sentences (see Castañeda 1970: 450; Finlay & Snedegar 2014: 104; Guendling 1974: 122–3; Haji 2002: 15; Hansson 2013: 197; Harman 1978: 113, 118; Humberstone 1971: 10; Mason 2003: 319; McConnell 1989: 438; Robinson 1971: 195; Sidgwick 1907/1981: 33; van Fraassen 1973: 6). I reply that I am not claiming that every "ought to be" sentence expresses a deontic claim (of obligatorinesss) 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.

reply, compare the poisoning example with 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.[17]

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. (1) In the dog example, moral reasoners who know that it is impersonally obligatory that there be no dogs in the courthouse 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. (2) 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. (3) 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.[18]

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[17] 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.)

[18] One might think that the distinction between personal obligatoriness and obligatoriness simpliciter amounts to a *de re*/*de dicto* distinction: according to Forrester (1996: 65–6), "the 'ought to be' is a *de dicto* operator, while the

3. 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*.[19] 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*.

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

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'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 1991: 146): only some claims of personal obligatoriness (namely, those that are also claims of agential obligatoriness: see note 2) are "ought to do" claims, and only some "ought to be" claims (namely, those that are deontic rather than evaluative: see note 16) 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 (λ*x*(*OTx*)*g*: George is such that it is obligatory that he take out the garbage (*de re* simpliciter); λ*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 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* (Priest 2008: 355) instead of *g*: a descriptor need not denote the same object at every world.)

[19] Several remarks are in order. (1) 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). (2) Like (personal) obligatoriness (cf. note 1), 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). (3) Many ought-implies-can principles have been formulated in the literature (see Vranas 2018a: 3 n. 3 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. (4) In previous work (see Vranas 2018a), 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) I avoid talk of impersonal *obligations*.

courthouse. I argue next, however, that $IOIC_1$ 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 §2), but (by (4)) no agents can make it the case that we both win a gold medal; so $IOIC_1$ 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* (cf. Vranas 2018a: 12). (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:

(IOIC$_2$)   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; cf. Estlund 2020: 243–8; Southwood 2016: 11–7, 2018; Wiens 2015): 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 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 $IOIC_2$ is false.[20]

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[20] 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 $IOIC_2$, 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

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The above counterexample to IOIC$_2$ 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 (cf. note 2 and the "stit paraphrase thesis" in Belnap et al. 2001: 7–8). To avoid the counterexample, one might propose restricting IOIC$_2$ to agential propositions. This proposal yields the following principle:

(IOIC$_3$)   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 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 §2), 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 lOIC$_3$ is false. (In this counterexample to IOIC$_3$, I can assume that it is due to "human nature"—whatever this means: see Estlund 2011 and Southwood 2015—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.)

To avoid my counterexamples to IOIC$_2$ and IOIC$_3$, 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 21). 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

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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.

claims (e.g., the claim that simultaneity is non-relative) 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 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 28).

4. 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 (see Vranas 2018a: 5 n. 8). 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 (cf. Lewis 1986: 7; Thomason 1970; van Fraassen 1980: 94). 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).[21] 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*.

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[21] 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 2009: 211 n. 48) 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 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.)

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).[22]

(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).[23]

OIHC+ is structurally similar to OIC, and OIHC- is structurally similar to a principle that captures the idea that "ought" implies "can avoid" (see Vranas 2018a: 10–4). 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.

Thus: (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. (1) 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 5pm to stand watch during the night (from midnight to 4am). Additionally, your commander decrees at 6pm (without revoking the 5pm 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 5pm) that you stand watch during the night, but it is not (conditionally) obligatory (at any time starting at 6pm) that (P) you stand watch during the

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[22] One might object to OIHC+ by claiming that, in the dog example (see §2), 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 2018a: 16.)

[23] 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 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-.

night given that (Q) the alert is lifted before midnight. Suppose next that the alert is lifted at 8pm, so the proposition that the alert is lifted before midnight is historically necessary starting at 8pm. Then, starting at 8pm, 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 that this reasoning does not carry over to propositions that are *not* historically necessary at t. In the above example, at 7pm it is still obligatory that you stand watch during the night, although (a) it is not (conditionally) obligatory at 7pm that you stand watch during the night given that the alert is lifted before midnight and (b) it is *true* (though at 7pm not yet *historically necessary*) that the alert will be lifted before midnight. (2) P2 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). (3) Finally, P3 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 (cf. Vranas 2007: 188–90).

To defend next OIHC-, I note first that an argument parallel to my argument for OIHC+ 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, OIHC- quickly follows: $O_t(P)$ is conceptually equivalent to the claim that $\sim P$ (i.e., the negation of P) is forbidden at t,[24] 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. This concludes my argument for OIHC-, 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*

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[24] 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 1998; Hilpinen & McNamara 2013: 43; McNamara 2006/2019; Rönnedal 2009: 28-9), 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 conceptually equivalent to the principle that, by virtue of conceptual necessity, no logically necessary proposition is (conditionally) obligatory at any time. See note 28 for a possible objection to the latter principle.

necessary or historically impossible at a given time is neither obligatory nor forbidden at that time.[25]

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 Q which is historically possible at t, then Q is forbidden at t.[26] (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.[27] 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" (1983: 306; cf. 1986: 125; Feldman 1986: 43, 189). 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.[28] First, suppose that

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[25] (1) 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 2011: 147–51; Olson 2011: 68–70, 2014: 11–5, 2017: 60–2. (2) By ignoring P1 and considering only P2 and P3, 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.

[26] 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 2013: 126; Heuer 2010: 243–4; Kolodny 2018; Raz 2005; White 2017; contrast Kiesewetter 2015), but they are irrelevant to the case at hand.

[27] 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.

[28] Several authors accept the following weaker principle: every logically necessary proposition is obligatory (at every time). (See Anderson 1956/1967: 181–3; Åqvist 1984: 616–7, 1987: 19–20; Bailhache 1991: 17–9, 23–4; Hansson 1969: 380; Prior 1958: 137–8; Segerberg 1971: 152; Stenius 1963: 253; cf. Føllesdal & Hilpinen 1971: 13;

you call me at 2pm and thus you satisfy your obligation (arising from your promise) to call me by 2pm. Then, according to the above principle, after 2pm it is (still) obligatory (since it is historically necessary) that you call me by 2pm, and this remains obligatory forever (even after you die). Second, suppose that you kill me at 2pm and thus you violate your obligation to never kill me. Then, according to the above principle, after 2pm 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.[29]

5. 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

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van Fraassen 1972: 421. For rejections of the principle, see al-Hibri 1978: 14–6; Carmo & Jones 2002: 270, 294, 338; Dahl 1974: 501; Harrison 1978: 23; Mares 1992: 11–2; Pigden 1989: 139; Prior 1955: 221–2; van Rijen 1993: 265; von Wright 1951a: 10–1, 1951b: 38, 1981a: 8, 1981b: 402, 1988: 60. On this debate, see also Humberstone 2015: 246, 2019: 1429.) Defenders of the principle typically acknowledge that our intuitions (concerning, 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 (1978: 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.

[29] 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 & Yu 1997: 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 2018a: 17): if at 8am 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 8am the proposition that you never smoke starting at 8am 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 8am). *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 2007: 200-1 n. 10, 2018a: 9, 2018b: 492). 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 Vranas 2018a: 18 n. 41—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).

other—the standpoints that correspond to particular agents (cf. Nagel 1970, 1986). 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 (see Schroeder 2008/2016; cf. Hurka 2021). 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.

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