IMPERATIVE FOUNDATIONS
FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF OBLIGATIONS*

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Abstract. Consider three sets of questions in the metaphysics of obligations. (1) What kind of entity is an obligation? Can an obligation exist without being in force? (2) What is it for an obligation to be satisfied or violated? Can an obligation be satisfied or violated repeatedly? (3) How are obligations individuated? Can different people have the very same obligation? These questions are neglected in the literature, but I argue that they are interesting, and that they can be illuminated by examining the relationship between obligations and prescriptions (understood as the entities that imperative sentences typically express; e.g., commands). Ultimately, I argue that obligations are identical to certain prescriptions; for example, your obligation to confess is identical to the prescription expressed by “confess”. This entails the novel metaethical thesis that moral obligations are prescriptions.

1. Introduction: Taking obligations seriously

Professors are not allowed to have sex with their students. In other words, it is forbidden for professors to have sex with their students. Does it follow that professors have an obligation not to have sex with their students? It is natural to say so, but talk of obligations raises a host of puzzling questions. What kind of entities are obligations? If obligations are abstract entities, do they exist necessarily or contingently? If obligations exist necessarily, in what sense does your professor’s obligation not to have sex with you “disappear” when the professor dies? Moreover, what is it for an obligation to be satisfied or violated? If a professor has sex with the same student twice, does the professor violate a single obligation twice or two different obligations once? Can different people have the very same obligation? If two professors have sex with the same student, do they violate the same obligation or two different obligations? Such questions have not received much attention in the literature: the metaphysics of obligations is an underdeveloped field.

One might argue that this lack of attention is warranted because talk of obligations is a mere façon de parler and can always be replaced with talk of obligatoriness. For example, suppose that in February you promise me that you will attend my wedding (scheduled for September), but in April we quarrel and I disinvite you. Saying that from February to April you have an obligation to attend my wedding is just another way of saying that from February to April it is obligatory for you to attend my wedding; there is thus no commitment to the existence of an entity—an obligation—that persists from February to April. I reply that talk of obligations cannot always be replaced with talk of obligatoriness. To see this, consider first a trivial example: the claim that every obligation is self-identical cannot be expressed just in terms of obligatoriness. For a non-trivial example, suppose that in June we patch up our quarrel, and you promise me again that you will attend my wedding. Consider the claim that the obligation (to attend my wedding) you ac-

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quire—i.e., you start having—in June is different from the obligation you had acquired in February. This claim cannot be expressed just in terms of obligatoriness: one can say that from February to April and again starting from June it is obligatory for you to attend my wedding, but this does not entail that in June you acquire a new obligation (instead of reacquiring the old obligation). For another non-trivial example, suppose that in June you also promise my fiancée that you will attend my wedding. Consider the claim that in June you acquire a single obligation to attend my wedding (one that you owe both to me and to my fiancée), not two distinct obligations (one that you owe to me and one that you owe to my fiancée). This is another claim that cannot be expressed just in terms of obligatoriness: one can say that attending my wedding becomes obligatory for you both towards me and towards my fiancée (although for different reasons), but this does not entail that you acquire only one obligation (instead of two).

One might grant that talk of obligations cannot always be replaced with talk of obligatoriness, but might argue that the questions about the individuation of obligations that I implicitly raised in the previous paragraph are devoid of practical interest: what does it matter whether in June you acquire one obligation (to attend my wedding) or two? I reply that, regardless of whether in this specific example it matters, the general question of how to individuate obligations is of considerable practical interest. To see this, consider conflicts of obligations. Suppose you can rescue only one out of four people trapped in a burning building. You might reason as follows: “my obligation to rescue Alice is stronger than my obligation to rescue either Bob or Carol, and is also stronger than my obligation to rescue either Carol or Derek; nevertheless, taken together, the last two obligations override the first, so I must rescue Carol”. To engage in such reasoning, you need a way to individuate obligations. It will not do to reply that you can just individuate obligatory actions instead. This will not do because maybe distinct obligations (e.g., an obligation that you owe to me and an obligation that you owe to my fiancée) correspond to the same obligatory action, and maybe distinct obligatory actions correspond to the same obligation (e.g., many obligatory actions may correspond to your obligation to obey the law). Or maybe not, but my point is that the issue merits investigation: it cannot be just assumed at the outset that there is a one-to-one correspondence between obligations and obligatory actions (cf. Nolan 2014: 204).

Moreover, regardless of their practical interest, questions about the individuation and the nature of obligations are of considerable theoretical interest. If one cares about whether there can be coincident objects, like a statue and a lump of clay, why not also care about whether there can be distinct obligations to perform the same action? If one cares about whether possible worlds (or universals) are concrete or abstract, why not also care about whether obligations are concrete or abstract? If one cares about whether a state of affairs can exist without obtaining, why not also care about whether an obligation can exist (or be violated) without being in force?

In this paper, I take obligations seriously, and I take steps to redress the neglect of the metaphysics of obligations in the literature. My central thesis is that several questions in the metaphysics of obligations can be illuminated by examining the relationship between obligations and what I call prescriptions, namely the entities that imperative sentences typically express (e.g., commands). My starting point is the observation that, for example, your obligation to confess and the prescription expressed by “confess” are satisfied under exactly the same conditions, namely exactly if you confess (and are violated exactly if you do not confess); I say that the obligation and the prescription are associated. In §2, I examine the satisfaction and the violation of obligations, and I argue that, (1) for every obligation, there is a unique prescription associated with the obligation (i.e., the association relation is a function from obligations to prescriptions). In §3, I exam-
ine the individuation of obligations, and I argue that (2) no distinct obligations are associated with the same prescription. Taken together, (1) and (2) amount to the Correspondence Result: the association relation is a one-to-one correspondence between all obligations and certain prescriptions. In §4, I examine the nature of obligations, and I use the Correspondence Result to defend the Identity Thesis: every obligation is identical to a prescription (in fact, to its associated prescription). The Identity Thesis entails the novel metaethical thesis that moral obligations are prescriptions. In the Appendix, I situate that novel thesis in the metaethical landscape.

2. The satisfaction/violation of obligations and the association function

2.1. Prescriptions

Since my central thesis is that several questions in the metaphysics of obligations can be illuminated by examining the relationship between obligations and prescriptions, I start with some remarks about prescriptions. Just as propositions are the entities that declarative sentences typically express, prescriptions are the entities that imperative sentences typically express: commands, requests, instructions, suggestions, and so on. I wish to remain neutral on the metaphysical status of propositions and of prescriptions, so I take no stand on whether, for example, they are concrete or abstract, structured or unstructured. Just as some propositions are never expressed, some prescriptions are never expressed.¹ The prescription (that can be) expressed by (addressing to you the imperative sentence) “confess” is satisfied exactly if you confess and is violated exactly if you do not confess; call the proposition that you confess the “satisfaction proposition” of the prescription, and call the proposition that you do not confess (more carefully, that it is not the case that you confess) the “violation proposition” of the prescription. More generally, for every prescription there are two corresponding propositions (which are logically incompatible): the satisfaction proposition of the prescription, which specifies the conditions under which the prescription is satisfied, and the violation proposition of the prescription, which specifies the conditions under which the prescription is violated.² A prescription is satisfied exactly if its satisfaction proposition is true, and is violated exactly if its violation proposition is true.³

No distinct prescriptions have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition. One can see this by noting that, given a satisfaction and a violation proposition, further factors are irrelevant to the individuation of prescriptions. For example, the sources of im-

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¹ Just as there are “unstated statements” if a statement is understood as a proposition rather than as a declarative utterance, there are “uncommanded commands” if a command is understood as a prescription rather than as an imperative utterance. See Vranas 2008: 553–4 n. 12 for further discussion.

² In the above example, the violation proposition is the negation of the satisfaction proposition; more generally, this is so for all and only unconditional prescriptions, like the prescription expressed by “confess”. By contrast, the prescription expressed by “if you are guilty, confess” is conditional (i.e., not unconditional): its violation proposition (namely, the proposition V that you are guilty but you do not confess) is not the negation of its satisfaction proposition (namely, of the proposition that you are guilty and you confess). (On an alternative view, which does not distinguish between unconditional and conditional prescriptions, the satisfaction proposition of the prescription expressed by “if you are guilty, confess” is the proposition that either you are not guilty or you confess, and thus is the negation of V. I have argued against this alternative view elsewhere—see Vranas 2008: 534–5, 2018: 22—but this debate is irrelevant to my purposes in this paper.)

³ Is it necessary that a prescription is satisfied (or violated) exactly if its satisfaction (or violation) proposition is true? One might argue as follows that it is not. Let Q be the prescription expressed by “confess”. Consider a possible world w at which you do not exist. The violation proposition of Q (namely, the proposition that you do not confess) is true at w, but Q is not violated at w because Q does not exist at w (cf. Hoffmann 2003: 643). To avoid taking a stand on these issues, I will just say that, necessarily, if a prescription exists, then it is satisfied (or violated) exactly if its satisfaction (or violation) proposition is true.
perative utterances are irrelevant to the individuation of prescriptions: if your mother urges you to confess and your father urges you to confess, then your mother and your father express the same prescription—just as they express the same proposition if they both state that you will confess.\(^4\) For another example, the *illocutionary forces* (Searle & Vanderveken 1985) of imperative utterances are irrelevant to the individuation of prescriptions: if your mother requests you to confess and your father orders you to confess, then your mother and your father express the same prescription—just as they express the same proposition if your mother asserts that you will confess and your father conjectures that you will confess.\(^5\) One might object that the targets of imperative utterances are relevant to the individuation of prescriptions: if I address to Sam (a token of) the imperative sentence “confess” and you address to Pat (another token of) the same imperative sentence, then we express different prescriptions. Indeed we do, I reply, but the two prescriptions have different satisfaction (and violation) propositions: the satisfaction proposition of the prescription that I express is the proposition that Sam confesses, but the satisfaction proposition of the prescription that you express is the proposition that Pat confesses.\(^6\) So this is no counterexample to my claim that no distinct prescriptions have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) In this example and in the next one in the text, I assume that the imperative utterances of your mother and of your father are simultaneous. One might argue that, if your mother urges you at 9am to (sooner or later) confess and your father urges you at 11am to (sooner or later) confess, then your mother and your father express different prescriptions: if (unbeknown to your father) you only confess at 10am, then the prescription that your mother expresses is satisfied but the prescription that your father expresses is not satisfied (because the latter prescription is satisfied only if you confess at some time later than 11am). If so, I reply, then the two prescriptions have different satisfaction (and violation) propositions, so this is no counterexample to my claim that no distinct prescriptions have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition. In fact, a modification of the above example suggests that the times of imperative utterances are irrelevant to the individuation of prescriptions: if your mother urges you at 9am to confess at noon and your father urges you at 11am to confess at noon, then your mother and your father express the same prescription—just as they express the same proposition if your mother states at 9am that you will confess at noon and your father states at 11am that you will confess at noon. Cf. Vranas 2008: 554 n. 12.

\(^5\) See Sosa 1964: 21–2, 1967: 57; Vranas 2008: 554 n. 14. One might object that the prescription expressed by your mother, which is a request, cannot be the same as the prescription expressed by your father, which is an order: a request cannot be the same as (i.e., numerically identical to) an order. In reply, I agree that a request cannot be the same as an order if requests and orders are understood as *speech acts*. But my claim that your mother’s request is the same (because it is the same prescription) as your father’s order is not the claim that your mother’s speech act is the same as your father’s speech act: it is instead the claim that the prescription expressed by your mother’s speech act (a prescription that may be called a “request” because your mother’s speech act is a request) is the same as the prescription expressed by your father’s speech act (a prescription that may be called an “order” because your father’s speech act is an order).

\(^6\) By contrast, if I address to Sam (a token of) the imperative sentence “someone turn on the light” (understood as “let it be the case that someone turns on the light”, not as “make it the case that someone turns on the light”) and you address to Pat (another token of) the same imperative sentence, then we express the same prescription (if we express a prescription at all; see Vranas 2008: 554 n. 15), whose satisfaction proposition is the proposition that someone turns on the light. This suggests that the targets of imperative utterances are irrelevant to the individuation of prescriptions.

\(^7\) Here is another objection to my claim. Consider the imperative sentences \((S_1)\) “don’t tell anyone”, \((S_2)\) “don’t tell anyone, especially my boss”, and \((S_3)\) “don’t tell anyone; but if you do, at least don’t tell my boss”. One might argue that the prescriptions expressed by these three imperative sentences have the same satisfaction proposition (namely, the proposition that you do not tell anyone) and the same violation proposition (namely, the proposition that you tell someone), but the prescription \(Q\) expressed by \(S_1\) is distinct from the prescriptions expressed by \(S_2\) and by \(S_3\) because, according to the latter two prescriptions but not according to \(Q\), the following proposition \(P\) holds: it is worse (as far as I am concerned) if you tell my boss than if you tell someone else. I reply that neither \(S_2\) nor \(S_3\) expresses
2.2. The satisfaction and the violation of obligations

The satisfaction and the violation of obligations are analogous to the satisfaction and the violation of prescriptions. Suppose, for example, that you have an obligation to confess. This obligation is satisfied exactly if you confess and is violated exactly if you do not confess; call the proposition that you confess the “satisfaction proposition” of the obligation, and call the proposition that you do not confess the “violation proposition” of the obligation. More generally, for every obligation there are two corresponding propositions (which are logically incompatible): the satisfaction proposition of the obligation, which specifies the conditions under which the obligation is satisfied, and the violation proposition of the obligation, which specifies the conditions under which the obligation is violated.\(^8\) An obligation is satisfied exactly if its satisfaction proposition is true, and is violated exactly if its violation proposition is true.\(^9\)

One might object that there is a significant disanalogy between the violation of obligations and the violation of prescriptions. Suppose that in the morning you have an obligation (because you have promised) to call me at midnight, but starting at noon you no longer have this obligation (because at noon you are released from your promise). Suppose further that you do not call me at midnight (and thus the proposition that you do not call me at midnight is true). Then the prescription expressed by “call me at midnight” is violated; but it seems false that your obligation to call me at midnight is violated, since you no longer have this obligation at midnight. This is also an alleged counterexample to the claim that an obligation is violated if its violation proposition is true.

The objection in the previous paragraph relies on the idea that, for your obligation to call me at midnight to be violated, it is (necessary but) not sufficient that you fail to (i.e., you do not) call me at midnight: it is also necessary that you have the obligation at midnight. This is necessary because—one might argue—\((1)\) your obligation to call me at midnight is violated only if your failure to call me at midnight is (pro tanto) impermissible for you at midnight, but \((2)\) this failure is not (pro tanto) impermissible for you at midnight if you no longer have the obligation at midnight (assuming that you have at midnight no other obligation which is violated if you fail to call

\(^8\) Although every obligation has both a satisfaction proposition and a violation proposition, identifying the satisfaction proposition and the violation proposition of a particular obligation is not always straightforward. For example, one might argue that the obligation that arises from your promise to confess is satisfied not exactly if you confess, but rather exactly if you confess with the motive of keeping your promise (cf. King 2014; Williams 1981: 117). In reply, distinguish \((1)\) an unconditional obligation \(O_1\) whose satisfaction proposition is the proposition that you confess from \((2)\) an unconditional obligation \(O_2\) whose satisfaction proposition is the proposition that you confess with the motive of keeping your promise. For simplicity, I understand your obligation to confess as \(O_1\); I am not denying that, if you promise to confess, sometimes you acquire \(O_2\) instead of \(O_1\). (An obligation, like a prescription, is unconditional exactly if its violation proposition is the negation of its satisfaction proposition, and is conditional otherwise; see note 2.)

\(^9\) Is it necessary that an obligation is satisfied (or violated) exactly if its satisfaction (or violation) proposition is true? One might argue as in note 3 that it is not, but one might also argue for the same conclusion as follows. Suppose that you (actually) have an obligation \(O\) to confess. Consider a possible world \(w\) at which you have no obligation to confess, and you do not confess (but you exist). The violation proposition of \(O\) (namely, the proposition that you do not confess) is true at \(w\), but \(O\) is not violated at \(w\) because \(O\) does not exist at \(w\). To avoid taking a stand on these issues for the moment (contrast §4, especially note 57), I will just say that, necessarily, if an obligation exists, then it is satisfied (or violated) exactly if its satisfaction (or violation) proposition is true.
me at midnight). The main point is that, for obligations (in contrast to prescriptions), the concept of violation is normatively loaded: it has impermissibility “built into” it.

In reply, I grant that there is a (normatively) loaded concept of violation; but I maintain that there is also a non-loaded concept, which amounts to the truth of the violation proposition. The non-loaded concept is more fundamental, in the sense that it is built into the loaded concept: as a matter of conceptual necessity, your obligation to call me at midnight is violated in the loaded sense only if it is violated in the non-loaded sense (i.e., only if you do not call me at midnight). We are then faced with a terminological choice. One option is to reserve the term “violation” for the loaded concept, and to use some other term (e.g., “unfulfillment”) for the non-loaded concept. Another option (which I choose) is to reserve the term “violation” for the non-loaded concept, and to use some other term—I will use “impermissible violation”—for the loaded concept. Neither option is entirely satisfactory, but nothing substantive in this paper hangs on my terminological choice. Given my choice, in the above example I will say that both the prescription expressed by “call me at midnight” and your obligation to call me at midnight are violated, but neither the prescription nor the obligation is impermissibly violated.10 Similar remarks apply to satisfaction.

Besides being non-loaded, the concepts of satisfaction and violation (as I understand them) are timeless and non-agential: a prescription or an obligation is satisfied (or violated) simpliciter, not satisfied at a given time or by a given agent. Clearly, however, there are also time-indexed and agential concepts of satisfaction and violation: if you turn on the light at noon, then the prescription expressed by “someone turn on the light” becomes satisfied at noon by you, and is satisfied at every later time. Here is how I propose to define time-indexed and agential satisfaction (and violation). (1) An obligation is satisfied at a given time (at which it exists; I omit this qualification in what follows) exactly if its satisfaction proposition is settled—in other words, is historically necessary—at that time; i.e., the proposition is logically entailed by the history of the world up to and including that time (understood as the conjunction of all true propositions that are not about any later time). For example, if you shred a document at midnight, then your obligation to shred the document is satisfied (one could say that it is in a “state of satisfaction”) at midnight and at every later time but not at any earlier time. (2) An obligation becomes satisfied at a given time exactly if its satisfaction proposition becomes settled at that time; i.e., the proposition is settled at every later time but is not settled at any earlier time. For example, if you shred a document at midnight, then your obligation to shred the document becomes satisfied at midnight. (3) An obligation becomes satisfied by a given agent (at a given time)—in other words, an agent satisfies an obligation (at a given time)—exactly if the agent makes it the case that the obligation becomes satisfied (at that time). For example, if you shred a document at midnight, then your obligation to shred the document becomes satisfied by you—in other words, you satisfy the obligation—at midnight.11 This is so even if you shred the document unintentionally; intentional


11 If you push a button at noon and as a result the document is shredded at midnight, do you satisfy at noon or at midnight your obligation to shred the document? Both answers are problematic. According to my proposed definition, you satisfy the obligation at midnight (when the obligation becomes satisfied), even if you die before midnight (unless the obligation does not exist after you die). According to an alternative possible definition, you satisfy the obligation at noon, although the obligation has not yet become satisfied. Nothing substantive in this paper hangs on
satisfaction by an agent can be similarly defined. Similar definitions can be given for the violation of obligations, and for the satisfaction and the violation of prescriptions.

It follows from the above definitions that it is impossible for an obligation to become satisfied (or violated) more than once: necessarily, if the satisfaction proposition of an obligation—or indeed any proposition—becomes settled at a given time, it is settled at every later time, so it never becomes settled again. One might object, however, that your obligation to never steal becomes violated every time you steal. In reply, I grant that repeated violations seem possible for some obligations (which I call conjunctive obligations): your obligation to never steal, your obligation to pay your rent every month, and so on. Nevertheless, repeated violations are impossible for other obligations (which I call non-conjunctive obligations): your obligation to meet me at noon, your obligation to turn in a paper by midnight, and so on. It may be helpful to say that conjunctive obligations have non-conjunctive obligations as conjuncts: your conjunctive obligation to turn in a paper by midnight; your conjunctive obligation to never steal becomes impermissibly violated at midnight—but not if at 11pm I release you from your promise to be in Boston by midnight. (Agential impermissible violation can be similarly defined.)

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\[12\] Can similar definitions be given for the (pro tanto) impermissible violation of an obligation? No: things are more complicated here. Take any obligation \(O\) that you have at some time, and let \(V\) be the violation proposition of \(O\). (1) One might propose that \(O\) is (timelessly) impermissibly violated exactly if \(V\) is both true and (timelessly) impermissible for you. This will not do: there is no timeless impermissibility, as opposed to impermissibility at a given time (or at every time, or at some time). (2) One might propose that \(O\) is impermissibly violated at time \(t\) exactly if \(V\) is both settled at \(t\) and impermissible for you at \(t\). (For example, your obligation to call me at midnight is impermissibly violated at midnight exactly if both (it is settled at midnight that) you fail to call me at midnight and this failure is impermissible for you at midnight.) This will not do if “ought” implies “can” (OIC), in the sense that an agent has an obligation only at times at which the agent can make it the case that the violation proposition of the obligation is false (Vranas 2018): if \(V\) is settled at \(t\), then at \(t\) you cannot make it the case that \(V\) is false, so (by OIC) you do not have \(O\) at \(t\), and thus \(V\) is not impermissible for you at \(t\) (assuming that you have at \(t\) no other obligation which is violated if \(V\) is true; to avoid this complication, in what follows I replace the claim that \(V\) is impermissible for you at \(t\) with the stronger claim that you have \(O\) at \(t\)). (3) One might propose that \(O\) becomes impermissibly violated at \(t\) exactly if both \(V\) becomes settled at \(t\) and you have \(O\) right before \(t\) (i.e., at every time before \(t\) in some open time interval that includes \(t\)). This will not do if OIC is true: if \(V\) becomes settled at \(t\), then right before \(t\) you cannot make it the case that \(V\) is false (e.g., if you do not call me at midnight, then right before midnight you cannot call me at midnight: there is not enough time left for you to make the call by midnight), so (by OIC) right before \(t\) you do not have \(O\). (4) I propose instead that \(O\) becomes impermissibly violated at \(t\) exactly if both \(V\) becomes settled at \(t\) and right before \(t\) you lack (i.e., you do not have) \(O\) only because you cannot make it the case that \(V\) is false. (The point of the word “only” in “only because” is to exclude—i.e., not to count as cases of impermissible violation—cases in which \(O\) is revoked and not reinstated before \(t\).) For example, if at 10pm you miss the last flight from Detroit to Boston and thus you become unable to be (and you are not) in Boston by midnight, then your obligation to be in Boston by midnight becomes impermissibly violated at midnight—but not if at 11pm I release you from your promise to be in Boston by midnight. (Agential impermissible violation can be similarly defined.)

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\[13\] Strictly speaking, I should talk about “temporally conjunctive” and “temporally non-conjunctive” obligations: temporally conjunctive obligations have temporally disjoint temporally non-conjunctive obligations as conjuncts (i.e., have as conjuncts temporally non-conjunctive obligations whose satisfaction propositions are about disjoint sets of times). For example, your obligation to both turn in a paper and take an online exam by midnight is conjunctive (if it has as conjuncts your non-conjunctive obligations to turn in a paper by midnight and to take an online exam by midnight) but is not temporally conjunctive and cannot be repeatedly violated (see also note 42). One might find objectionable the claim that a conjunctive obligation has obligations as conjuncts: if you have an obligation to never steal, do you thereby have infinitely many obligations (e.g., for every time \(t\) until you die, an obligation not to
committed to saying this: I am noting that repeated violations are impossible for some obligations (which I call “non-conjunctive”), but I do not need to take a stand on how these obligations are related to the obligations (which I call “conjunctive”) for which repeated violations seem possible. We are then faced with a terminological choice. One option is to use the term “violation” so that repeated violations are possible for conjunctive obligations but impossible for non-conjunctive ones. Another option (which I choose) is to use the term “violation” so that repeated violations are impossible (even for conjunctive obligations), and to use some other term—I will use “partial violation”—only for conjunctive obligations (so that repeated partial violations are possible). If one accepts that conjunctive obligations have non-conjunctive obligations as conjuncts, one can say that a conjunctive obligation becomes partially violated at a given time exactly if a non-conjunctive obligation which is a conjunct of the conjunctive obligation becomes violated at that time. Nothing substantive in this paper hangs on my terminological choice. Given my choice, if you have an obligation to call me both at noon and at midnight but you call me neither at noon nor at midnight, I will say that your obligation becomes violated at noon but not at midnight, and that your obligation becomes partially violated both at noon and at midnight. Similar remarks apply to the satisfaction of obligations, and to the satisfaction and the violation of prescriptions.

2.3. The association function

Say that an obligation and a prescription are associated exactly if they have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition. For example, your obligation to confess and the prescription expressed by “confess” are associated. (Instead of saying that an obligation and a prescription are associated, one can equivalently say that the obligation is associated with the prescription, or that the prescription is associated with the obligation.) Note that (1) every obligation has an associated prescription: for example, your obligation to confess if you are guilty is associated with the prescription expressed by “if you are guilty, confess”. Moreover, (2) no distinct prescriptions are associated with the same obligation: if prescriptions \( Q \) and \( Q' \) are associated with the same obligation \( O \), then \( Q \) and \( Q' \) have the same satisfaction proposition as \( O \) and the same violation proposition as \( O \), so \( Q \) and \( Q' \) are not distinct (since, as I argued in §2.1, no distinct prescriptions have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition). Taken together, (1) and (2) amount to the claim that, for every obligation, there is a unique prescription associated with the obligation (which I call the associated prescription of the

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Explanations and notes:

1. If a conjunctive obligation is partially violated at a given time, then at least one of its conjuncts must be violated at that time.

2. The association function is a mapping that associates an obligation with its associated prescription. This function is used to determine whether an obligation is satisfied or violated, and to distinguish between conjunctive and non-conjunctive obligations.

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14 Here is an argument for my claim that every obligation has an associated prescription. Take any obligation \( O \). Let \( S \) and \( V \) be, respectively, the satisfaction and the violation proposition of \( O \). Let \( Q \) be the prescription expressed by “if you are guilty, confess”. Then (see note 2) \( Q \) is satisfied exactly if \((S \lor V) \& S\) is true (and thus exactly if \( S \) is true), and is violated exactly if \((S \lor V) \& \neg S\) is true (and thus exactly if \( V \) is true, since \( S \) and \( V \) are logically incompatible). So \( S \) and \( V \) are also, respectively, the satisfaction and the violation proposition of \( Q \), and thus \( Q \) is associated with \( O \). This argument relies on the assumption (which I find plausible) that the propositions \((S \lor V) \& S\) and \( S \) are identical, not just logically equivalent; this assumption does not commit me to the claim (which I find implausible: see Vranas 2017: 355 n. 1) that all logically equivalent propositions are identical. One might object as follows to my claim that \( Q \) is satisfied exactly if \((S \lor V) \& S\) is true: on the alternative view of prescriptions mentioned in note 2, \( Q \) is satisfied instead exactly if \((S \lor V) \& \neg S\) is false. I reply that, on this alternative view (applied also to obligations), \( S \) is the negation of \( V \), so the claim that \( Q \) is satisfied exactly if \((S \lor V) \& \neg S\) is false entails that \( Q \) is satisfied exactly if \( S \) is true.
obligation); more formally, the association relation is a function from obligations to prescriptions. This is my main thesis in this section.

One might object that some obligations are associated with multiple prescriptions: for example, your obligation to pray every day is associated with the prescriptions expressed by “pray today”, “pray tomorrow”, etc. I reply that none of these prescriptions is associated with your obligation: none of them has the same satisfaction proposition as your obligation (namely, the proposition that you pray every day). The unique associated prescription of your obligation is instead the prescription expressed by “pray every day”. On the other hand, the prescription expressed by “pray today” is the unique associated prescription of a different obligation; namely, of your more specific obligation to pray today (assuming that you have this obligation).

One might alternatively object (to my main thesis in this section) that some obligations are associated with different prescriptions at different times. For example, suppose you have an obligation to pay (between April 20 and April 30) your next month’s rent, and your landlord only accepts checks. On April 15, however, your landlord informs you that he has just decided to no longer accept checks: he will only accept cash. One might argue that your obligation is associated before April 15 with the prescription expressed by “pay your rent by check”, but is associated after April 15 with the prescription expressed by “pay your rent in cash”. In reply, distinguish two cases. (1) Suppose your lease specifies that you must pay your rent by check. Then you have before April 15 an obligation to pay your rent by check. But your landlord’s decision to stop accepting checks is in effect an attempt to change the terms of your lease; assuming that this attempt succeeds (e.g., you accept the change), on April 15 you stop having the obligation to pay your rent by check, and you start having an obligation to pay your rent in cash. But then you do not have a single obligation associated with different prescriptions at different times: you have instead (at different times) two distinct obligations, and each of them is (timelessly, or maybe at every time) associated with only one prescription. (2) Suppose alternatively your lease does not specify which methods of payment are acceptable. Then your obligation to pay your rent (which you have both before and after April 15) is neither an obligation to pay your rent by check nor an obligation to pay your rent in cash: it is instead an obligation to pay your rent by an acceptable method of payment. Because the acceptable methods of payment change over time, one might argue that you have different derived obligations at different times: before April 15, you have a derived obligation to pay your rent by check, but after April 15, you have a derived obligation to pay your rent in cash. If so, I reply, then each derived obligation, like your (primary) obligation to pay your rent, is (timelessly, or maybe at every time) associated with only one prescription.

3. The individuation of obligations and the Correspondence Result

3.1. Coarse-grained versus fine-grained individuation of obligations

I will defend the thesis that no distinct obligations have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition (so no distinct obligations are associated with the same pre-
scription). Equivalently, the thesis is that the identity of satisfaction and violation propositions is sufficient for the identity of obligations. (Trivially, it is also necessary: by the indiscernibility of identicals, identical obligations must have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition.) In other words, obligations are individuated in what I call the coarse-grained way, namely only in terms of their satisfaction and violation propositions: given a satisfaction and a violation proposition, further factors are irrelevant to the individuation of obligations. For example, the normative kinds of obligations are irrelevant: if you both promise that you will build a new school and sign a contract to build a new school, then you acquire a single obligation to build a new school (an obligation that is both moral and legal), not two distinct obligations to build a new school (an obligation that is only moral and an obligation that is only legal). For another example, the creditors of obligations (i.e., those to whom one owes the obligations) are irrelevant: if you promise both your mother and your father that you will donate blood, then you acquire a single obligation to donate blood (an obligation that you owe both to your mother and to your father), not two distinct obligations to donate blood (an obligation that you owe only to your mother and an obligation that you owe only to your father). I am not yet defending these claims: I am instead noting that, if obligations are individuated in the coarse-grained way, then in the above examples you do not have two distinct obligations.

By contrast, if obligations are individuated in a fine-grained way, the identity of satisfaction and violation propositions is not sufficient (although it is of course necessary) for the identity of obligations: further factors are also relevant. Different fine-grained ways of individuating obligations specify different sets of further factors as relevant. For example, the thesis that obligations are individuated in what I call the kinds/creditors way—or K/C thesis for short—is the conjunction of two claims: first, the identities of (a) satisfaction and violation propositions, (b) normative kinds, and (c) creditors are jointly sufficient for the identity of obligations; second, the identities of any two out of (a), (b), and (c) are not jointly sufficient. (The thesis that obligations are individuated in the coarse-grained way entails the first claim but contradicts the second.) Note that the K/C thesis does not entail (for example) that no obligation has multiple creditors: the thesis is compatible with the claim that, in the last example of the previous paragraph, you have a single obligation to donate blood, an obligation that you owe both to your mother and to your father. The thesis entails instead (for example) that some obligations with both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition have distinct creditors.

Before I provide my arguments for coarse-graining (i.e., for the thesis that obligations are individuated in the coarse-grained way), I need to introduce some concepts. I introduce those concepts in the next subsection, in the course of addressing some objections to coarse-graining.

### 3.2. Unsuccessful objections to coarse-grained individuation

Suppose you promise a friend that you will learn Swedish, and you also sign with your employer (namely, a Swedish university) a contract that requires you to learn Swedish. As a result, (1) you

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16 To avoid the problem mentioned in note 4, I assume that you promise at the same time at which you sign a contract. I implicitly (or sometimes explicitly) make similar assumptions throughout the paper whenever they are needed to ensure identity of satisfaction propositions.

17 To see this, note first that, if the identities of (a) and (b) are not jointly sufficient for the identity of obligations, then some obligations $O$ and $O'$ have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition and are of the same normative kind but are distinct. Moreover, if the identities of (a), (b), and (c) are jointly sufficient for the identity of obligations, then $O$ and $O'$ have distinct creditors. But then $O$ and $O'$ have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition and have distinct creditors.
have both a moral obligation to your friend to learn Swedish and a legal obligation to your employer to learn Swedish. But (1) does not entail that you have two distinct obligations: (1) is compatible with the claim that (2) you have the same obligation to your friend and to your employer, an obligation that is both moral and legal. One might object to (2) by claiming that no obligation is both moral and legal. I reply that this claim is implausible: if you swear an oath (during a naturalization ceremony) to support and defend the Constitution, then it is plausible that you acquire an obligation (to support and defend the Constitution) that is both moral and legal, since the oath is both morally and legally binding. One might also object to (2) by claiming that no obligation has multiple creditors. I reply that this claim is also implausible: if you stand in front of a crowd of 500 people and say “I promise to each and every one of you that I will vote to increase the minimum wage”, then it is plausible that you acquire a single obligation to vote to increase the minimum wage (an obligation that you owe to 500 people), not 500 distinct obligations. One might further object to (2) by claiming that (3) you have no legal obligation to your friend to learn Swedish, so (4) your obligation to your friend is not legal and thus (5) is not the same as your obligation to your employer (which is legal). I reply that (3) does not entail (4). I agree that (3) is true: there is no legal reason why you owe your friend an obligation to learn Swedish, and in this sense you have no legal obligation to your friend to learn Swedish. But if your obligation to your friend to learn Swedish is the same as your obligation to your employer to learn Swedish, then (4) is false: your obligation to your friend is legal, in the sense that there is a legal reason—namely, the fact that you signed a contract—why you have the obligation (although that fact is not a reason why you owe the obligation to your friend).

Here is another objection to the claim that you have the same obligation to your friend and to your employer: (1) your obligation to your employer is stronger than your obligation to your friend, so (2) the former obligation is not the same as the latter. I reply that (1), properly understood, does not entail (2). To explain, I will distinguish two senses in which one obligation can be stronger than another: a greater-importance sense, and a greater-accountability sense. First, suppose you promise me that you will drive me to the airport, but your daughter has an accident and needs you to drive her to the hospital. Then your resulting obligation to drive your daughter to the hospital is stronger than your resulting obligation to drive me to the airport, in the following sense: in light of all and only those considerations that ground these obligations, it is more important that your obligation to drive your daughter to the hospital be satisfied than that your obligation to drive me to the airport be satisfied (so if they cannot be both satisfied and there are no further normatively relevant considerations, then—all things considered—you must drive your daughter to the hospital). Second, suppose you promise me that you will donate blood,
and you also solemnly swear to your spouse that you will donate blood. Then there is a sense in which your resulting obligation to your spouse (to donate blood) is stronger than your resulting obligation to me (to donate blood), since solemnly swearing is more serious than merely promising. But your obligation to your spouse is not stronger than your obligation to me in the above sense of “stronger than”: it is not more important (in light of any considerations) that your obligation to your spouse be satisfied than that your obligation to me be satisfied, since your obligation to your spouse is satisfied exactly if your obligation to me is satisfied (i.e., exactly if you donate blood). So your obligation to your spouse is stronger than your obligation to me in a different sense of “stronger than”. I propose that it is stronger in the following sense: if you fail to donate blood, then you are more accountable to your spouse than to me for this failure.20 In other words (to coin a phrase), your obligation to your spouse is stronger towards your spouse than your obligation to me is towards me.21 Similarly, returning to the objection to coarse-graining at the beginning of this paragraph, your obligation to your employer (to learn Swedish) is not stronger than your obligation to your friend (to learn Swedish) in the greater-importance sense of “stronger than”; so (1), properly understood, is the claim that (3) your obligation to your employer is stronger towards your employer than your obligation to your friend is towards your friend.22 But (3) does not entail that the former obligation is not the same as the latter: possibly,

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20 One might propose instead that it is stronger in the following sense: your obligation to your spouse is grounded in a stronger reason for you to donate blood than your obligation to me is. The idea is that the former obligation is grounded in the fact (f) that you solemnly swear to your spouse that you will donate blood, the latter obligation is grounded in the fact (g) that you promise me that you will donate blood, and f is a stronger reason for you to donate blood than g is. I reply that “stronger than” is ambiguous for reasons just as it is for obligations. To see this, note that one might similarly propose that, in the example I used to illustrate the greater-importance sense of “stronger than” for obligations, your obligation to drive your daughter to the hospital is stronger than your obligation to drive me to the airport in the following sense: the former obligation is grounded in a stronger reason than the latter obligation is. Given this ambiguity, I ask: in what sense is f a stronger reason for you to donate blood than g is, if not in a sense corresponding to the claim that, if you fail to donate blood, then you are more accountable to your spouse than to me for this failure? I address in effect a possible answer (in terms of greater blameworthiness) in note 22.

21 Consider also an example in which a first obligation is stronger than a second in the greater-importance sense of “stronger than” but the second obligation is stronger than the first in the greater-accountability sense of “stronger than”. Suppose I promise a stranger that I will donate blood (because I have a rare blood type and several people need blood of this type), and you solemnly swear to your son that you will drive him to the airport (because he can ill afford the money for a taxi). Then my resulting obligation to donate blood is stronger than your resulting obligation to drive your son to the airport in the greater-importance sense of “stronger than”: in light of all and only those considerations that ground these obligations, it is more important that my obligation to donate blood be satisfied than that your obligation to drive your son to the airport be satisfied. But your obligation is stronger than mine in the greater-accountability sense of “stronger than”: if you fail to drive your son to the airport and I fail to donate blood, then (other things being equal) you are more accountable to your son for failing to drive him to the airport than I am to the stranger for failing to donate blood (since solemnly swearing to a close relative is more serious than merely promising a stranger). In other words, your obligation is stronger towards your son than my obligation is towards the stranger.

22 One might object that (1) does not have to be understood as (3): (1) can be understood instead as the claim (which corresponds to a third sense of “stronger than”) that, (4) if you only had the obligation to your employer and you failed to learn Swedish, then (other things being equal) you would be more blameworthy than if you only had the obligation to your friend and you failed to learn Swedish. I reply that (4) does not entail that your obligation to your employer is not the same as your obligation to your friend: possibly, they are the same obligation (to learn Swedish) and, if the only ground of the obligation were the contract with your employer and you failed to learn Swedish, then (other things being equal) you would be more blameworthy than if the only ground of the obligation were your promise to your friend and you failed to learn Swedish. Note also that this third sense of “stronger than” arguably
they are the same obligation (to learn Swedish), which is *stronger towards your employer than towards your friend* (i.e., if you fail to learn Swedish, then you are more accountable to your employer than to your friend for this failure).

### 3.3. In favor of coarse-grained individuation

#### 3.3.1. The irrelevance of creditors

I will argue that coarse-graining is true: given a satisfaction and a violation proposition, further factors are irrelevant to the individuation of obligations. First, I will argue that the *creditors* of obligations are irrelevant. Consider two cases (or possible worlds): in case 1, you promise your *mother* that you will donate blood, but in case 2, you promise at the same time both your *mother* and your *father* that you will donate blood. In both cases, there are no further normatively relevant considerations. My argument starts with the intuitively appealing claim that (roughly) in case 2 there is a stronger overall “normative demand” on you to donate blood than there is in case 1 (because in case 2 you make a promise to one more person than in case 1 that you will donate blood). I propose to formulate this claim more precisely as follows:

**The Premise:** In case 2, you have a stronger all-things-considered obligation to donate blood than you have in case 1.

To accept the Premise is not to prejudge the issue of how obligations are individuated: the Premise does not entail the *single-obligation view* that in case 2 you have only one obligation to donate blood (an obligation that you owe both to your mother and to your father). Indeed, the Premise is compatible with the following two alternatives to the single-obligation view. First, the *double-obligation view*, according to which in case 2 you have exactly two obligations to donate blood: an obligation that you owe only to your mother, and an obligation that you owe only to your father. Second, the *triple-obligation view*, according to which in case 2 you have exactly three obligations to donate blood: an obligation that you owe only to your mother, an obligation...
that you owe only to your father, and an obligation that you owe both to your mother and to your father (and to no one else). (These are the only two plausible alternatives to the single-obligation view: it is not plausible to claim that in case 2 you have no obligation or more than three obligations to donate blood.) Although the Premise is compatible with all three of the above views (and thus does not entail coarse-graining), I will argue that only the single-obligation view can explain why the Premise is true: neither the double-obligation view nor the triple-obligation view can do so.

In case 1, you have only one—and thus only one all-things-considered—obligation \( O_{1M} \) to donate blood (an obligation that you owe only to your mother). According to the Premise, in case 2 you have an all-things-considered obligation \( O_2 \) to donate blood which is stronger in case 2 than \( O_{1M} \) is in case 1. (The Premise leaves it open whether \( O_2 \) is identical to \( O_{1M} \), but in §3.3.3 I give an argument in support of such identities.\(^{24}\)) I understand the claim that \( O_2 \) is stronger in case 2 than \( O_{1M} \) is in case 1 in terms of greater importance (instead of greater accountability: see §3.2); namely, as the claim that, in light of all and only those considerations that ground \( O_{1M} \) in case 1 and \( O_2 \) in case 2, it is more important that \( O_2 \) be satisfied in case 2 than that \( O_{1M} \) be satisfied in case 1. According to the single-obligation view, in case 2 you have only one—and thus only one all-things-considered—obligation \( O_{2MF} \) to donate blood (an obligation that you owe both to your mother and to your father). The single-obligation view can explain as follows why the Premise is true (taking \( O_2 \) to be \( O_{2MF} \)): because, in light of all and only those considerations that ground \( O_{1M} \) in case 1 and \( O_{2MF} \) in case 2, it is more important that \( O_{2MF} \) be satisfied (i.e., that you donate blood) in case 2 than that \( O_{1M} \) be satisfied (i.e., that you donate blood) in case 1 (since \( O_{1M} \) is grounded in case 1 only in your promise to your mother, but \( O_{2MF} \) is grounded in case 2 both in your promise to your mother and in your promise to your father).\(^{25}\) By contrast, I argue next that the double-obligation view cannot explain why the Premise is true.

According to the double-obligation view, in case 2 you have exactly two obligations to donate blood: an obligation \( O_{2M} \) that you owe only to your mother, and an obligation \( O_{2F} \) that you owe only to your father. In case 2, \( O_{2M} \) is just as strong as \( O_{2F} \) (i.e., \( O_{2M} \) is just as strong in case 2 as \( O_{2F} \) is in case 2); it is just as important (in light of any considerations) that \( O_{2M} \) be satisfied (i.e., that you donate blood) in case 2 as it is that \( O_{2F} \) be satisfied (i.e., that you donate blood) in case 2. Moreover, since \( O_{1M} \) is grounded in case 1 only in your promise to your mother and similarly \( O_{2M} \) is grounded in case 2 only in your promise to your mother, \( O_{2M} \) is just as strong in case 2 as \( O_{1M} \) is in case 1.\(^{26}\) It follows that neither \( O_{2M} \) nor \( O_{2F} \)—and thus none of the obligations (to do-

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\(^{24}\) A given obligation can be stronger at one possible world than at another: your obligation to press a button (in order to save ten innocent people from imminent death) would have been stronger if, by pressing the button, you had been guaranteed to save twenty innocent people from imminent death. So it is possible that (you have \( O_{1M} \) also in case 2 and) \( O_{1M} \) is stronger in case 2 than in case 1.

\(^{25}\) More precisely, \( O_{1M} \) is grounded in case 1 in the fact that you promise your mother that you will donate blood, and \( O_{2MF} \) is grounded in case 2 both in the fact \( f_M \) that you promise your mother that you will donate blood and in the fact \( f_F \) that you promise your father that you will donate blood. As far as the explanation in the text is concerned, it does not matter whether in case 2 you make a single promise (to both your mother and your father) or two separate promises (a promise only to your mother and a promise only to your father): in either case, both \( f_M \) and \( f_F \) obtain in case 2.

\(^{26}\) One might object that it is more important that \( O_{2M} \) be satisfied in case 2 than that \( O_{1M} \) be satisfied in case 1: if \( O_{1M} \) is satisfied in case 1, then only a promise to your mother is satisfied, but if \( O_{2M} \) is satisfied in case 2, then both a promise to your mother and a promise to your father are satisfied. (And isn’t this precisely the judgment of comparative importance that I used in order to argue that the single-obligation view can explain why the Premise is true?) I reply that it does not follow that \( O_{2M} \) is stronger in case 2 than \( O_{1M} \) is in case 1. This is because the above judgment of comparative importance takes into account all normatively relevant considerations, not all and only those consid-
nate blood) that you have in case 2 according to the double-obligation view—is stronger in case 2 than $O_{1M}$ in case 1: according to the double-obligation view, the Premise is false (so the double-obligation view cannot explain why the Premise is true). A similar argument can be given concerning the triple-obligation view; I provide the details in a note.

I conclude that, if you promise at the same time both your mother and your father that you will donate blood, then you have, right after the time at which you promise, only one obligation to donate blood (an obligation that you owe both to your mother and to your father). But what if you promise at different times? Then I can no longer talk about the obligations that you have right after the time at which you promised, so modify my argument as follows. Consider two cases: in case 1, you promise your mother at 7am that you will donate blood at noon, but in case 2, you promise both your mother at 7am and your father at 10am that you will donate blood at noon. Start with the following premise (hereinafter “the Modified Premise”): in case 2, you have at 11am a stronger all-things-considered obligation to donate blood at noon than you have at 11am in case 1 (since in case 2 one more promise than in case 1 is binding at 11am). I can now argue that only the single-obligation view can explain why the Modified Premise is true; I give the details in a note, since they parallel the details of my argument in the previous two paragraphs. I conclude that, if at a given time you promise your mother and at a different time you

27 Nevertheless, as I said, the Premise is compatible with the double-obligation view: one could consistently (though, I maintain, implausibly) deny my claim that $O_{2M}$ is just as strong in case 2 as $O_{1M}$ is in case 1.

28 According to the triple-obligation view, in case 2 you have exactly three obligations to donate blood: an obligation $O'_{2M}$ that you owe only to your mother, an obligation $O'_{2F}$ that you owe only to your father, and an obligation $O'_{2MF}$ that you owe both to your mother and to your father (and to no one else). In case 2, all three obligations are equally strong (since each of them is satisfied exactly if you donate blood: it is just as important—in light of any considerations—that you donate blood in case 2 as it is that you donate blood in case 2). Moreover, since $O_{1M}$ is grounded in case 1 only in your promise to your mother and similarly $O'_{2M}$ is grounded in case 2 only in your promise to your mother, $O'_{2M}$ is just as strong in case 2 as $O_{1M}$ is in case 1. It follows that none of your three obligations to donate blood is stronger in case 2 than $O_{1M}$ is in case 1: according to the triple-obligation view, the Premise is false.

29 This temporal qualification was implicit in what preceded. By analogy with my definition of “right before $t$” in note 12, I define “right after $t$” as “at every time after $t$ in some open time interval that includes $t$”.

30 Strictly speaking, instead of “stronger” I should say “stronger at 11am”. This is because a first obligation can be stronger than a second at one time but not at another; i.e., it can be more important at one time but not at another that the first obligation be satisfied than that the second obligation be satisfied (in light of all and only those considerations that ground the two obligations at the respective times). This is in turn because an obligation can be stronger at one time than at another; i.e., it can be more important at one time than at another that the obligation be satisfied (in light of all and only those considerations that ground the obligation at the two times). For example, suppose that you are a doctor and you have an obligation to catch the noon bus in order to reach a remote village and treat as soon as possible every villager who is ill when the bus arrives. If the number of ill villagers increases as time passes, then your obligation becomes stronger: it becomes more important that you catch the noon bus.

31 Here are the details. In case 1, you have at 11am only one obligation $O_{1M}$ to donate blood at noon (an obligation that you owe only to your mother). According to the single-obligation view, in case 2 you also have at 11am only one obligation $O_{2MF}$ to donate blood at noon (an obligation that you owe both to your mother and to your father). The single-obligation view can explain as follows why the Modified Premise is true: because, in light of all and only those considerations that ground at 11am $O_{1M}$ in case 1 and $O_{2MF}$ in case 2, it is more important at 11am that $O_{2MF}$ be satisfied in case 2 than that $O_{1M}$ be satisfied in case 1 (since $O_{1M}$ is grounded at 11am in case 1 only in your promise to your mother, but $O_{2MF}$ is grounded at 11am in case 2 both in your promise to your mother and in your promise to your father). According to the double-obligation view, in case 2 you have at 11am exactly two obligations to donate
promise your father that you will donate blood at noon, then, at any time (like 11am in the above example) at which both promises are binding, you have only one obligation to donate blood at noon. But what if there is no time at which both promises are binding, for example because you are released from the first promise before you make the second promise? Then the above argument cannot show that the obligation you acquire by making the first promise is the same as the obligation you acquire by making the second promise. To show this, I provide next a different argument.

3.3.2. Reacquiring lost obligations, and the irrelevance of owners

Consider the following case (case 1): you promise your mother at 7am that you will donate blood at noon, you are released from this promise at 9am, and you promise your father at 10am that you will donate blood at noon (and there are no further normatively relevant considerations). I will argue that (as coarse-graining entails) in case 1 you do not have (at different times) two distinct obligations to donate blood at noon: you have instead (both from 7am to 9am and again starting at 10am) only one obligation to donate blood at noon (an obligation that you owe only to your mother from 7am to 9am, and that you owe only to your father starting at 10am). My starting point is the following idea: whether you have two distinct obligations or only one obligation to donate blood at noon does not depend on whether I promise that you will donate blood at noon (because my promises do not affect your obligations, except in special cases that I am excluding from consideration; for an example of such a special case, suppose you promise to negotiate on the condition that I first promise to negotiate). More precisely, consider a case—case 2—which is like case 1 except that in case 2 I promise your spouse at 6am that you will donate blood at noon (and I am never released from this promise). My starting premise (which relies on the above idea) is that you have only one obligation (to donate blood at noon) in case 1 exactly if you have only one obligation in case 2. To reach my desired conclusion that you have only one obligation in case 1, it remains for me to argue that you have only one obligation in case 2.

I will argue as follows that in case 2 you have only one obligation to donate blood at noon. Let $O_S$, $O_M$, and $O_F$ be, respectively, the obligations that (1) I acquire at 6am (when I promise your spouse), (2) you acquire at 7am (when you promise your mother), and (3) you acquire at 10am (when you promise your father) in case 2. The satisfaction proposition of $O_S$, $O_M$, and $O_F$ is the proposition $D$ that you (will) donate blood at noon. I will argue that $O_M = O_S$ and $O_F = O_S$. Consequently, $O_M = O_F$: the obligation you acquire by promising your mother at 7am is the same as the obligation you acquire by promising your father at 10am (and thus you have only one obligation to donate blood at noon). Before I argue that $O_M = O_S$ and $O_F = O_S$, I address three objections to my claim that, when I promise your spouse that you will donate blood at noon, I acquire an obligation $O_S$ with satisfaction proposition $D$.

First objection. One might argue that (1) I have no obligation which is satisfied exactly if you do something (e.g., you donate blood at noon), because (2) my obligations are obligations for me to donate blood at noon: an obligation $O_{2M}$ that you owe only to your mother, and an obligation $O_{2F}$ that you owe only to your father. In case 2, $O_{2M}$ is just as strong at 11am as $O_{2F}$: it is just as important at 11am (in light of any considerations) that $O_{2M}$ be satisfied in case 2 as it is that $O_{2F}$ be satisfied in case 2. Moreover, since $O_{1M}$ is grounded at 11am in case 1 only in your promise to your mother and similarly $O_{2M}$ is grounded at 11am in case 2 only in your promise to your mother, $O_{2M}$ is just as strong at 11am in case 2 as $O_{1M}$ is in case 1. It follows that neither $O_{2M}$ nor $O_{2F}$—and thus none of the obligations (to donate blood at noon) that you have at 11am in case 2 according to the double-obligation view—is stronger at 11am in case 2 than $O_{1M}$ is in case 1: according to the double-obligation view, the Modified Premise is false. A similar argument can be given concerning the triple-obligation view, so only the single-obligation view can explain why the Modified Premise is true.
do (or to refrain from doing) something: they are satisfied exactly if I do (or I refrain from doing) something. I reply that (2) is false: my obligation (arising from my promise) to be in my office at noon (when you plan to come and meet me) is satisfied even if I do nothing (and I do not refrain from doing anything) but someone knocks me unconscious, carries me to my office, and wakes me up shortly before noon, so that I am in my office at noon.32

Second objection. One might argue, by appealing to the ought-implies-can principle that (3) I have an obligation only if I can make it the case that the obligation is satisfied (Vranas 2007, 2018), that (4) I have no obligation which is satisfied exactly if you donate blood at noon, because (5) I cannot make it the case that you donate blood at noon: if I force you to give blood, then you do not donate blood. I reply that (5) is false: there are possible ways in which I can make it the case that you donate blood at noon (without forcing you to give blood), and I assume that such a way is available to me in case 2. For example, if you are always eager to follow my advice, then by advising you to donate blood at noon I can make it the case that you donate blood at noon. One might object that my advice is not guaranteed to be followed. I reply that, if one understands the claim that I can make it the case that p as entailing that I can guarantee that p, then (3) is false: I have an obligation to be in Boston tonight (to give a talk), although I cannot guarantee that I will be in Boston tonight (because, e.g., I cannot guarantee that no terrorist attack will shut down the Boston airport before I arrive; in the unlikely event of such a shutdown, I will no longer have an obligation to be in Boston tonight, but now I do have such an obligation). Third objection. One might argue that, even if it is possible for me to have an obligation which is satisfied exactly if you donate blood at noon, when I promise that you will donate blood at noon I typically do not acquire such an obligation: I acquire instead an obligation which is satisfied exactly if I make it the case (i.e., I see to it) that you donate blood at noon. I reply that I can grant that this is typically so, but I assume that in case 2 the specific wording of my promise makes it clear that my promise counts as satisfied exactly if you donate blood at noon, even I do not make it the case that you donate blood.33

I proceed now to my argument for the claim that $O_M = O_S$ and $O_F = O_S$. Before I give the specifics, here is the general idea. In §3.3.1, I gave an argument for the conclusion that, (1) if at a given time you promise your mother and at a different time you promise your father—or, more generally, if you promise two people X and Y—that you will donate blood at noon, then, at any time at which both promises are binding, you have only one obligation to donate blood at noon. I can give a parallel argument for the conclusion that, (2) if two people X and Y promise that you will donate blood at noon, then, at any time t at which both promises are binding, only one obligation with satisfaction proposition D (i.e., the proposition that you will donate blood at noon) is in force. Taking X to be you and Y to be me, (2) entails that $O_M = O_S$ (taking t to be 8am, when both your promise to your mother and my promise to your spouse are binding), and (2) also entails that $O_F = O_S$ (taking t to be 11am, when both your promise to your father and my promise to your spouse are binding); therefore, (2) entails my desired conclusion that $O_M = O_F$. Although this is the general idea, for the sake of simplicity I will not argue directly for (2): I will instead argue directly that $O_M = O_S$. My argument starts with the intuitively appealing claim that (roughly) in case 2 there is at 8am a stronger overall “normative demand” to the effect that you donate

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32 Cf. McNamara 2004: 121; Vranas 2018: 6. Similarly, my obligation not to torture you tonight is satisfied even if I do not refrain from torturing you but instead I fall asleep and I sleep through the night. In the terminology I introduced in §2.2, my obligation is (timelessly) satisfied but I do not satisfy it: I do not make it the case that it becomes satisfied.

33 Moreover, I can grant that in case 2 I also acquire a conditional obligation to make it the case that you donate blood at noon if I realize that, unless I take action, you will not donate blood at noon.
blood at noon than there is at 8am in case 1 (because in case 2 one more promise—satisfied exactly if you donate blood at noon—than in case 1 is binding at 8am: in case 1, only your promise to your mother is binding at 8am, but in case 2, both your promise to your mother and my promise to your spouse are binding at 8am). I propose to formulate this claim more precisely as follows:

**The New Premise:** In case 2, a stronger (see note 30) all-things-considered obligation with satisfaction proposition $D$ is in force at 8am than is in force at 8am in case 1.

The New Premise does not entail the *single-obligation view* that in case 2 only one obligation with satisfaction proposition $D$ is in force at 8am (an obligation that you owe at 8am only to your mother, and that I owe at 8am only to your spouse). Nevertheless, together with the single-obligation view (which I will defend), the New Premise has the following consequence: in case 2, you have at 8am a stronger all-things-considered obligation to donate blood at noon than you have at 8am in case 1. By using my own claim that my promises do not affect your obligations, one might object to this consequence as follows: the strength of your obligation to donate blood at noon does not depend on whether I promise that you will donate blood at noon, so you do not have at 8am in case 2 a stronger all-things-considered obligation to donate blood at noon than you have at 8am in case 1. I reply that this objection equivocates between the greater-importance and the greater-accountability sense of “stronger than” (§3.2). I can grant that how accountable you are if you fail to donate blood at noon does not depend on whether I promise that you will donate blood at noon. Nevertheless, how important it is that you donate blood at noon depends on all reasons that favor (or oppose) your donating blood at noon, and thus does depend on whether I promise that you will donate blood at noon. My claim that my promises do not affect your obligations is, strictly speaking, the claim that my promises do not affect which obligations you have. My promises can affect how strong (in the greater-importance sense) your obligations are, since they can affect how important it is that your obligations be satisfied.

I can now argue that only the single-obligation view can explain why the New Premise is true; I give the details in a note, since they parallel the details of my argument in note 31.\(^{34}\) I conclude that $O_M = O_S$; similarly, by a parallel argument about 11am instead of 8am, $O_F = O_S$. Consequently, $O_M = O_F$: in case 2 (and thus also in case 1), you have only one obligation to donate

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\(^{34}\) Here are the details. In case 1, only one obligation $O_{1M}$ with satisfaction proposition $D$ is in force at 8am (an obligation that you owe at 8am only to your mother). According to the single-obligation view, in case 2 only one obligation $O_{2MS}$ with satisfaction proposition $D$ is in force at 8am (an obligation that you owe at 8am only to your mother, and that I owe at 8am only to your spouse). The single-obligation view can explain as follows why the New Premise is true: because, in light of all and only those considerations that ground at 8am $O_{1M}$ in case 1 and $O_{2MS}$ in case 2, it is more important at 8am that $O_{2MS}$ be satisfied in case 2 than that $O_{1M}$ be satisfied in case 1 (since $O_{1M}$ is grounded at 8am in case 1 only in your promise to your mother, but $O_{2MS}$ is grounded at 8am in case 2 both in your promise to your mother and in my promise to your spouse). According to the double-obligation view, in case 2 exactly two obligations with satisfaction proposition $D$ are in force at 8am: an obligation $O_{2M}$ that you owe at 8am only to your mother, and an obligation $O_{2S}$ that I owe at 8am only to your spouse. In case 2, $O_{2M}$ is just as strong at 8am as $O_{2S}$: it is just as important at 8am (in light of any considerations) that $O_{2M}$ be satisfied in case 2 as it is that $O_{2S}$ be satisfied in case 2. Moreover, since $O_{1M}$ is grounded at 8am in case 1 only in your promise to your mother and similarly $O_{2M}$ is grounded at 8am in case 2 only in your promise to your mother, $O_{1M}$ is just as strong at 8am in case 2 as $O_{1M}$ is in case 1. It follows that neither $O_{3M}$ nor $O_{2S}$—and thus none of the obligations (with satisfaction proposition $D$) that are in force at 8am in case 2 according to the double-obligation view—is stronger at 8am in case 2 than $O_{1M}$ is in case 1: according to the double-obligation view, the New Premise is false. A similar argument can be given concerning the triple-obligation view, so only the single-obligation view can explain why the New Premise is true.
blood at noon.\textsuperscript{35} You lose (i.e., you stop having) this obligation at 9am, when you are released from your promise to your mother, but you reacquire it (i.e., you start again having it) at 10am, when you promise your father that you will donate blood at noon.\textsuperscript{36} Different people have this obligation at different times at which it is in force: for example, both you and I have it between 7am and 9am, but only I have it between 9am and 10am.%%\textsuperscript{37} At 9:30am, then, I have an obligation which is satisfied exactly if you donate blood at noon, but you have no such obligation. To see that this is unproblematic, compare: if we are scheduled to play chess and I promise that you will lose (and I can beat you), then I have an obligation which is satisfied exactly if you lose, but you have no such obligation.

I conclude from the above considerations (together with the considerations in §3.3.1) that, given a satisfaction and a violation proposition, both the owners of obligations (i.e., those who have the obligations)\textsuperscript{38} and the creditors of obligations (i.e., those to whom the owners owe the obligations).%%\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{35} This obligation is grounded at 6:30am and at 9:30am only in my promise to your spouse, but is grounded at 8am both in my promise to your spouse and in your promise to your mother. The above argument in the text complements my reasoning in §3.3.1 as follows. I argued in §3.3.1 that, if you promise both your mother at 7am and your father at 10am that you will donate blood at noon, then at 11am you have only one obligation to donate blood at noon. But is that single obligation (to donate blood at noon) that you have at 11am the same as the single obligation (to donate blood at noon) that you have at 8am? My reasoning in §3.3.1 provided no answer to this question, but the above argument in the text can be adapted to provide an affirmative answer.

\textsuperscript{36} More specifically, one can say (1) you initially acquire the obligation at 7am (i.e., you acquire it at 7am and you do not have it at any earlier time), (2) you provisionally lose the obligation at 9am (i.e., you lose it at 9am and you have it at some later time), (3) you reacquire the obligation at 10am (i.e., you acquire it at 10am and you have it at some earlier time), and—assuming that at 11am you become permanently unable to donate blood—(4) you permanently lose the obligation at 11am (i.e., you lose it at 11am and you do not have it at any later time). (You acquire the obligation at t exactly if both (a) right before t you do not have it and (b) right after t—see note 29—you have it; you lose the obligation at t exactly if both (a) right before t you have it and (b) right after t you do not have it.)

\textsuperscript{37} This example suggests that one needs to distinguish the claim that an agent has an obligation at time t from the claim that the obligation is in force at t. (If some agent has an obligation at t, then the obligation is in force at t, but I plan to argue elsewhere that in some cases an obligation is in force at t although no agent has the obligation at t.) One then also needs to distinguish the claim that an agent acquires an obligation at t from the claim that the obligation arises at t (i.e., right before t it is not in force but right after t it is in force), and also to distinguish the claim that an agent loses an obligation at t from the claim that the obligation expires at t (i.e., right before t it is in force but right after t it is not in force). Continuing note 36, one can say that an obligation (1) originates (or initially arises) at t exactly it arises at t and it is not in force at any earlier time, (2) provisionally expires at t exactly if it expires at t and it is in force at some later time, (3) becomes restored (or rearises) at t exactly if it arises at t and it is in force at some earlier time, and (4) permanently expires at t exactly if it expires at t and it is not in force at any later time.

\textsuperscript{38} I use “owners” instead of debtors (i.e., those owners who owe the obligations to creditors) because one can have an obligation without owing it to anyone (so some obligations that have an owner have no creditor and thus have no debtor): for example, you may have an obligation to vote, an obligation to obey the laws of your country (Brandt 1964: 379), and an obligation to donate to charities. (There is a sense in which the last obligation is an obligation to charities: it is an obligation “to do something that materially involves” charities (Lance & Kukla 2013: 464–5). But you do not owe it to any charity: you are not accountable to any charity if you fail to donate to charities.) For my purposes in this paper, I do not need to endorse any specific account of what it is to owe an obligation to someone; Darwall (2012) proposes such an account. Darwall uses “obligor” instead of “owner” or “debtor”, and “obligee” instead of “creditor”; he calls (following Thompson 2004) “bipolar” the obligations that have both an obligor and an obligee (Darwall 2012: 333–4, 2013a: 20-39; cf. 2010a: 32–4, 2010b: 330, 2011: 259–60, 2013b: 62–3, 132–3). In my view, whether an obligation has a creditor (and thus whether an obligation is bipolar) can vary with time. For example, if before 10am you do not owe to anyone your obligation to vote tomorrow but at 10am you promise your spouse that you will vote tomorrow, then your obligation has no creditor before 10am but has a creditor (i.e., your spouse) after 10am. One might object that after 10am you have two distinct obligations to vote tomorrow: a bipolar (or “directed” see Gilbert 2004: 87) obligation, and a unipolar (or “undirected”) one (Cruft 2013: 195 n. 1). I reply that my argument in the text can be adapted to conclude that you have only one obligation.
tions) are irrelevant to the individuation of obligations (i.e., no obligations with both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition have distinct owners or distinct creditors). I hope it is clear that my arguments can be adapted to conclude that further factors (e.g., the normative kinds of obligations) are also irrelevant, so I conclude that coarse-graining is true: obligations are individuated only in terms of their satisfaction and violation propositions.

3.3.3. Cross-world individuation of obligations

My arguments so far enable me to conclude that, if obligations \( O \) and \( O' \) have the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition and are in force at the same world (for example, because you promise at the same world both your mother and your father that you will donate blood), then \( O = O' \). But what if \( O \) and \( O' \) are in force at different worlds? I claim that \( O = O' \) also in such cases. For example, I will argue now that, if at world \( w_1 \) you promise your mother that you will donate blood, and at world \( w_2 \) you promise your father that you will donate blood, then (in the absence of further normatively relevant considerations) the obligation \( O_{1M} \) that you acquire at \( w_1 \) is identical to the obligation \( O_{2F} \) that you acquire at \( w_2 \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World</th>
<th>Promises (and corresponding obligations)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( w_1 )</td>
<td>You promise your mother (( O_{1M} ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( w_3 )</td>
<td>You promise your mother (( O_{3M} )) and I promise your spouse (( O_{3S} ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( w_4 )</td>
<td>You promise your father (( O_{4F} )) and I promise your spouse (( O_{4S} ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( w_2 )</td>
<td>You promise your father (( O_{2F} ))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Four worlds.

My argument starts by considering a world \( w_3 \) (see Table 1) at which (a) you promise your mother that you will donate blood, and as a result you acquire an obligation \( O_{1M} \), and (b) I promise your spouse that you will donate blood, and as a result I acquire an obligation \( O_{3S} \). The difference in my promises between \( w_1 \) and \( w_3 \) does not affect which obligations you have, so (1) \( O_{1M} = O_{3M} \). By my argument in §3.3.2, (2) \( O_{3M} = O_{3S} \). Consider next a world \( w_4 \) (see Table 1) at which (a) you promise your father that you will donate blood, and as a result you acquire an obligation \( O_{4F} \), and (b) I promise your spouse that you will donate blood, and as a result I acquire an obligation \( O_{4S} \). The difference in your promises between \( w_3 \) and \( w_4 \) does not affect which obligations I have, so (3) \( O_{3S} = O_{4S} \). By my argument in §3.3.2, (4) \( O_{4S} = O_{4F} \). The difference in my promises between \( w_4 \) and \( w_2 \) does not affect which obligations you have, so (5) \( O_{4F} = O_{2F} \). By (1)–(5), \( O_{1M} = O_{2F} \), which is the desired result. For the sake of simplicity, I ignored considerations of time in this argument, but they could be easily incorporated.

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39 One might object as follows to my claim that the owners of obligations are irrelevant. Suppose I promise that you will donate blood, and you solemnly swear that you will donate blood. Then (1) your obligation is stronger than mine, so (2) your obligation is not the same as mine (although both obligations are satisfied exactly if you donate blood and are violated otherwise). This objection is similar to an objection to coarse-graining that I addressed in §3.2, and my reply is also similar: (1) properly understood, does not entail (2). In one sense, your obligation is not stronger than mine: it is not more important (in light of any considerations) that your obligation be satisfied than that my obligation be satisfied, since your obligation is satisfied exactly if mine is. So I propose that (1), properly understood, is the claim that, if you fail to donate blood, then (other things being equal) you are more accountable than I am for this failure; in other words (to coin a phrase), (3) your obligation is stronger for you than my obligation is for me. But (3) does not entail that your obligation is not the same as mine: possibly, they are the same obligation, which is stronger for you than for me. (One might alternatively propose to understand (1) and (3) as the claim that, in light of all and only those considerations that ground your obligation and mine, it is more important for you that your obligation be satisfied that it is for me that my obligation be satisfied. I do not need to take a stand on which proposal is better: on either proposal, (1) does not entail (2), so either proposal provides a reply to the above objection.)
3.4. Against fine-grained individuation

To bolster my defense of coarse-graining, I will argue against individuating obligations in a fine-grained way. To start with, I will argue against the K/C thesis, which (as I said in §3.1) is the conjunction of two claims: first, the identities of (a) satisfaction and violation propositions, (b) normative kinds, and (c) creditors are jointly sufficient for the identity of obligations; second, the identities of any two out of (a), (b), and (c) are not jointly sufficient.

To argue against the K/C thesis, consider the following case. At 7am, you promise your mother that you will sing, and you also promise your niece that you will dance (at the party tonight). At 9am, you change your mind, and you are released from your promises. At 10am, you change your mind again: you promise your father that you will sing, and you also promise your nephew that you will dance. You can both sing and dance, and there are no further normatively relevant considerations. Then you acquire at 7am an all-things-considered obligation $O_{SD}$ to both sing and dance (because this is what—all things considered—you must do). This obligation has no creditor: you do not owe it to your mother (because what you owe to your mother is to sing, not to both sing and dance), and you do not owe it to your niece or to anyone else. One might object that you owe it to the group whose only members are your mother and your niece. I reply that, unless you subscribe to the implausible view that any two people form a group, you may take two people $a$ and $b$ who do not form a group, and replace in my example your mother with $a$ and your niece with $b$. Similarly, you acquire at 10am an all-things-considered obligation $O'_{SD}$ to both sing and dance, an obligation that has no creditor. Then $O_{SD}$ and $O'_{SD}$ have the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition, are of the same normative kind (they are both moral), and have the same set of creditors (namely, the empty set); therefore, the K/C thesis entails (via its first conjunct) that $O_{SD} = O'_{SD}$. By contrast, since the obligation $O_S$ to sing that you acquire at 7am and the obligation $O'_S$ to sing that you acquire at 10am have distinct creditors (because you owe $O_S$ only to your mother but you owe $O'_S$ only to your father), the K/C thesis does not entail that $O_S = O'_S$. But then the K/C thesis faces the problem of treating similar comparisons differently: the comparison between (i) $O_S$ and $O'_S$ and the comparison between (ii) $O_{SD}$ and $O'_{SD}$ are similar because each of them is between obligations that you acquire by promising the same things to different people (i.e., (i) promising your mother that you will sing versus promising your father that you will sing, and (ii) promising your mother that you will sing and your niece that you will dance versus promising your father that you will sing and your nephew.

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40 One might alternatively object that you owe the obligation to your mother and your niece (a plurality of individuals instead of a group). I reply that I do not see how this differs from the (false) claim that you owe the obligation to your mother and you owe it to your niece. One might respond with an analogy: if you borrow $5 from Smith and $5 from Jones, then you owe $10 to Smith and Jones, but you do not owe $10 to Smith and you do not owe $10 to Jones. In reply, the claim that you owe $10 to Smith and Jones is the claim that you owe some amount to Smith, you owe some amount to Jones, and the sum of the two amounts is $10. But if the claim that (1) you owe $O_{SD}$ to your mother and your niece is similarly the claim that (2) you owe some obligation to your mother, you owe some obligation to your niece, and the conjunction of the two obligations is $O_{SD}$, then (1) is compatible with my claim that $O_{SD}$ has no creditor.

41 One might object that, if the claim that $O_S = O'_S$ is true, then it is also necessary, and thus it is entailed by every claim, including the K/C thesis. I reply that, even if the above claim is metaphysically necessary, it is not logically necessary, so it is not logically entailed by every claim. (Logical—rather than metaphysical—entailment is relevant here because the K/C thesis, in conjunction with my assumptions about the above case, logically entails that $O_{SD} = O'_{SD}$.)
that you will dance).\textsuperscript{42} The root of the problem is that the kinds/creditors way of individuating obligations is in effect gerrymandered: it takes the identities of (a) satisfaction and violation propositions and (b) normative kinds to be jointly sufficient for the identity of obligations that have no creditor but not for the identity of obligations that have a creditor. By contrast, the coarse-grained way does not face this problem: it is uniform rather than gerrymandered.

One might object by denying that you acquire at 7am an obligation to both sing and dance: one might claim that you acquire instead only an obligation to sing and an obligation to dance (Slote 1982: 12–4; cf. Fischer 1986: 81). In reply, compare a case in which you send an email saying “I promise that I will both sing and dance” with a case in which you send at the same time (from two different email accounts) an email saying “I promise that I will sing” and an email saying “I promise that I will dance”. The two cases do not differ in what (all things considered) you must do, and in the first case you acquire an (all-things-considered) obligation to both sing and dance, so in the second case you also acquire such an obligation. But if this argument succeeds, it succeeds regardless of whether in the second case you send the two emails to the same person or to different people. (This is not to say that you acquire the same obligation to both sing and dance regardless of whether you send the two emails to the same person or to different people—even although I believe that you do.) I conclude that, even if you send the two emails to different people (e.g., your mother and your niece, as in the previous paragraph), you acquire an obligation to both sing and dance.

In response to my argument against the K/C thesis, one might give up this thesis and claim instead that obligations are individuated in a fine-grained way different from the kinds/creditors way. For example, one might propose that obligations are individuated only in terms of their (a) satisfaction and violation propositions, (b) normative kinds, and (c) owners (rather than creditors).\textsuperscript{43} This proposal does not face the problem that I raised for the K/C thesis: the proposal entails both that $O_{SD} = O'_{SD}$ and that $O_S = O'_S$ (since all obligations have the same owner, namely you).\textsuperscript{44} But by comparing this proposal with the K/C thesis one can see that fine-grained ways of

\textsuperscript{42} One might object that the comparisons are not similar: one of them is between non-conjunctive obligations ($O_S$ and $O'_S$), and the other one is between conjunctive obligations ($O_{SD}$ and $O'_{SD}$). I reply that, arguably, every obligation is conjunctive: for example, your obligation $O_S$ to sing is an obligation to both sing-or-dance and sing-or-not-dance.

\textsuperscript{43} An alternative proposal is to restrict the K/C thesis to non-conjunctive obligations. Since an obligation to both sing and dance is conjunctive (even if not temporally conjunctive: see note 13), the restricted K/C thesis does not entail that $O_{SD} = O'_{SD}$, and thus does not face the problem that I raised for the (unrestricted) K/C thesis. One problem with this proposal is that, arguably, every obligation is conjunctive (as I explained in note 42). Moreover, even if some obligations are non-conjunctive, another problem is that this proposal is incomplete: it is silent on the individuation of conjunctive obligations. To get a complete proposal, one needs to combine this proposal with a claim to the effect that conjunctive obligations are individuated in a way different from the kinds/creditors way (otherwise, the combined proposal would just be the K/C thesis). But then the combined proposal would face a problem similar to the problem that I raised for the K/C thesis: it would be gerrymandered rather than uniform.

\textsuperscript{44} Here is yet another alternative proposal. One might claim that you owe your obligation $O_{SD}$ to both sing and dance partly to your mother and partly to your niece; by analogy, if I own the upper story and you own the lower story of a two-story building, then each of us partly owns the building. More generally, one might propose defining a partial creditor of a conjunctive (see notes 13 and 42) obligation $O$ as a creditor of a conjunct of $O$ who is not a creditor of $O$. One might then propose that obligations are individuated only in terms of their (a) satisfaction and violation propositions, (b) normative kinds, (c) creditors, and (d) partial creditors. This proposal does not face the problem that I raised for the K/C thesis: the proposal does not entail that $O_{SD} = O'_{SD}$ (since $O_{SD}$ and $O'_{SD}$ have different sets of partial creditors). I reply that this proposal faces the following problem. Suppose that, (1) at 1pm, you promise your mother that you will sing (at the party tonight), (2) at 2pm, you are released from your promise, (3) at 3pm, you promise again your mother that you will sing, and you also promise your niece that you will dance, (4) at 4pm, you are released from your promises, and (5) at 5pm, you promise again your mother that you will sing, and
individuating obligations face the problem of answering the following question: given a satisfaction and a violation proposition, why are some further factors rather than others (e.g., owners rather than creditors) relevant to the individuation of obligations? Coarse-graining does not face this problem, since it amounts to the claim that no further factors are relevant.

3.5. Further unsuccessful objections to coarse-grained individuation

To complete my defense of coarse-graining, I will address two further objections. The first objection is based on an example by Mark Brown (1996: 51–2). Suppose that on Monday you borrow $400 from me, promising to repay me on Friday, and on Wednesday you borrow again $400 from me, promising to repay me also on Friday. One might argue that the prescription $Q$ that I can express by “pay me $400 on Friday” is associated with two obligations: an obligation $O_1$ (that you acquire on Monday) to repay me the first loan on Friday, and an obligation $O_2$ (that you acquire on Wednesday) to repay me the second loan on Friday.\footnote{One might object that you do not acquire $O_1$ on Monday and $O_2$ on Wednesday: you acquire instead both $O_1$ and $O_2$. I reply that this alternative view provides no prescription of the two $O_3$ are similar because each of them is between (i) an obligation that you acquire by promising your mother that you will sing and (ii) an obligation that you acquire by both promising your mother that you will sing and promising your niece something else.} Not so, I reply: if $Q$ is associated with both obligations, then (by the definition of association in §2.3) both obligations are satisfied if the prescription is satisfied, and then both loans are repaid if you pay me only $400 on Friday—which is clearly false. But then, one might ask, what are the associated prescriptions of $O_1$ and $O_2$? I answer that they are the prescriptions that I can express, respectively, by “repay me the first loan on Friday” and “repay me the second loan on Friday”.\footnote{One might object that you do not lose $O_1$ on Wednesday but you acquire instead both $O_1$ and $O_2$. I reply that this alternative view provides no successful objection to coarse-graining: as I go on to argue in the text, $Q$ is not associated with both $O_1$ and $O_2$.} What exactly counts as repayment of either loan depends on the specifics of the situation. For example, if you pay me only $400 on Friday without specifying whether it is in repayment of the first or of the second loan, then which loan is repaid depends on whether it is decided (or it has been agreed) to apply the payment to the first or to the second loan.

The second objection to coarse-graining that I will address appeals to an analogy with beliefs. Do two people who believe the same proposition (e.g., that France is in Europe) have the same belief or different beliefs? A typical answer is that the two people have the same belief type but different belief tokens: the two tokens are of the same type because they have the same proposition as their content. Similarly, one might propose that two people who have an obligation which is satisfied exactly if you donate blood have the same obligation type but different obligation tokens: the two tokens are of the same type because they have the same prescription as their content. To you also promise your niece that you will sing or dance. Let $O_5$, $O_5'$, and $O_5''$ be the obligations to sing that you acquire at 1pm, 3pm, and 5pm respectively. The proposal under consideration entails that $O_5 = O_5'$ (since neither $O_5$ nor $O_5'$ has any partial creditors) but does not entail that $O_5 = O_5''$ (since $O_5''$ has your niece as a partial creditor: see note 42), and thus faces the problem of treating similar comparisons differently: the comparison between $O_5$ and $O_5'$ and the comparison between $O_5$ and $O_5''$ are similar because each of them is between (i) an obligation that you acquire by promising your mother that you will sing and (ii) an obligation that you acquire by both promising your mother that you will sing and promising your niece something else.\footnote{One might argue that the associated prescriptions of $O_1$ and $O_2$ are instead the prescriptions $Q_1$ and $Q_2$ that I can express, respectively, by “pay me $400 on Friday, specifying that it is in repayment of the first loan” and “pay me $400 on Friday, specifying that it is in repayment of the second loan”. I reply that this will not do: if you give me two $400 checks on Friday without specifying which check is in repayment of which loan, then both $O_1$ and $O_2$ are satisfied (because both loans are repaid), but neither $Q_1$ nor $Q_2$ is satisfied.}
insist that the two people in the former case have the same belief is to deny the existence of a fine-grained concept of belief (which corresponds to belief tokens); similarly (the objection continues), to insist—as I do—that the two people in the latter case have the same obligation is to deny the existence of a fine-grained concept of obligation (which corresponds to obligation tokens). We are then faced (according to the objection) with a terminological choice similar to the two terminological choices that I mentioned in §2.2 (concerning violation versus impermissible violation and violation versus partial violation). One option is to use the terms “obligation type” and “obligation token” for the coarse-grained and the fine-grained concept of obligation respectively. Another option (which I implicitly chose) is to reserve the term “obligation” for the coarse-grained concept, and to use some other term (e.g., “fine-grained obligation”) for the fine-grained concept. Nothing substantive hangs on my choice, as long as I acknowledge the existence of both concepts, so my whole defense of coarse-graining was a red herring—or so the objection concludes.

Several strands of this objection need to be disentangled. (1) It is implausible to say that, if each of us has an obligation which is satisfied exactly if you donate blood, then we have different obligation tokens (of the same obligation type): tokens are typically understood as “concrete particulars” that have a “spatio-temporal location” (Wetzel 2006/2014), but it is implausible to say that obligations are spatially located. (Do your obligations move around when you do?) So an analogy with belief types and tokens is inapt.47 (2) Maybe a better analogy is with internalism and externalism about belief (Lau & Deutsch 2002/2016): if I sincerely utter “water quenches thirst” and my Twin-Earth counterpart also sincerely utters “water quenches thirst”, do we have the same belief or different beliefs? But this analogy undermines the above objection to coarse-graining: the dispute between internalism and externalism about belief is not resolved just by distinguishing narrow-content from broad-content concepts of belief (Brown 2002/2016), so why think that the dispute between the coarse-grained way and fine-grained ways of individuating obligations is resolved just by distinguishing coarse-grained from fine-grained concepts of obligation? (3) I do not need to deny the existence of fine-grained concepts of obligation: the point of my arguments for coarse-graining is instead that fine-grained concepts are not useful because they correspond to views about obligations that cannot explain our judgments of comparative obligation strengths. To see this, recall the gist of my main argument (§3.3.1): if in case 1 you promise your mother that you will donate blood and in case 2 you promise both your mother and your father that you will donate blood, then the double-obligation view (in contrast to the single-obligation view) cannot explain why in case 2 you have a stronger all-things-considered obligation to donate blood than you have in case 1. So something substantive—namely, whether we can explain our judgments of comparative obligation strengths—does hang on my choice to reserve the term “obligation” for the coarse-grained concept.48 (4) The situation is different con-

47 Or, if one similarly denies that there are belief tokens (because one finds implausible the claim that belief tokens are spatially located), then there is no analogy to start with. Another problem with the analogy is that there are many fine-grained ways of individuating obligations: which of them corresponds to obligation tokens? Note finally that an analogy with belief types and tokens does not support the claim that, if you promise both your mother and your father that you will donate blood, then you have two distinct obligations to donate blood: if you currently believe that France is in Europe both because your mother told you so and because your father told you so, you do not currently have two distinct belief tokens that France is in Europe.

48 One might use the “subscript gambit” (Chalmers 2011: 532) to argue that the dispute between the coarse-grained way and fine-grained ways of individuating obligations is merely verbal. Specifically, if we bar the use of the term “obligation” and we introduce two new terms, namely “coarse-grained obligation” (or “obligation_1”) and “fine-grained obligation” (or “obligation_2”), one might argue that no substantive dispute remains: in case 2, you have a
cerning the two terminological choices that I mentioned in §2.2: for example, both the loaded and the non-loaded concept of violation are useful. (5) Consider finally the suggestion that prescriptions are the contents of obligations (just like propositions are the contents of beliefs). I argue against this suggestion in §4 (by arguing that obligations are identical to prescriptions), but here I note that the suggestion is compatible with coarse-graining: the suggestion is compatible with the claim that no distinct obligations have the same prescription as their content.

3.6. The Correspondence Result

In §2.3, I concluded that, (1) for every obligation, there is a unique prescription associated with the obligation. From my defense of coarse-graining, I infer that (2) no distinct obligations are associated with the same prescription. Taken together, (1) and (2) amount to the Correspondence Result: the association relation is a one-to-one correspondence between all obligations and certain prescriptions (namely, those prescriptions that have an associated obligation). Given this result, the question arises: what exactly is the relationship between an obligation and its associated prescription? In the next section, I argue that every obligation is identical to its associated prescription.

4. The nature of obligations and the Identity Thesis

4.1. The Identity Thesis

I will defend (a version of) the Identity Thesis: every obligation is (numerically) identical to a prescription. Equivalently, and more simply, the Identity Thesis is the claim that (1) every obligation is a prescription.\(^{49}\) In conjunction with the claim (which I defended in §2.1) that (2) no distinct prescriptions have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition, the Identity Thesis entails that, (3) if an obligation and a prescription are associated, then they are identical (which in turn entails that every obligation is identical to its associated prescription)\(^{50}\). (To prove (3) from (1) and (2), take an obligation \(O\) and a prescription \(Q\) that are associated; i.e., they have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition. By (1), \(O\) is a prescription; so, by (2), \(O = Q\).) Although (if I am correct) every obligation is a prescription, not every prescription is an obligation: for example, the prescription expressed by “disprove the Pythagorean theorem” is not an obligation (if no obligation has an impossible satisfaction proposition). The Identity Thesis does not tell us which prescriptions are obligations: for example, it does not tell us whether the prescription expressed by “donate blood” is an obliga-

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\(^{49}\) By first-order logic, ‘\(\forall x(\text{Ox} \implies \exists y(\text{Qy} \land x = y))\)’ is equivalent to ‘\(\forall x(\text{Ox} \implies \text{Qx})\)’. (Let \(\text{Ox}\) stand for “\(x\) is an obligation” and \(\text{Qx}\) stand for “\(x\) is a prescription”.)

\(^{50}\) More precisely, the claim that every obligation is identical to its associated prescription (understood as the claim that, for every obligation, there is a unique prescription associated with the obligation, and the obligation is identical to that prescription) is equivalent to the conjunction of (3) with the claim—which follows from (1)—that every obligation has an associated prescription.
tion. Nevertheless, the Identity Thesis is not uninformative: it answers the question, what kinds of entities are obligations? The answer that obligations are prescriptions is incomplete, however, since I remain neutral on the metaphysical status of prescriptions (§2.1).

In defense of the Identity Thesis, note that it provides a simple explanation of the Correspondence Result: if every obligation is a prescription, then the association relation relates every obligation to itself (since every obligation has both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition as itself) and only to itself (by claim (3) of the previous paragraph), and then the association relation is a one-to-one correspondence between all obligations and certain prescriptions (namely, those prescriptions that are obligations). By contrast, I do not see how opponents of the Identity Thesis could explain the Correspondence Result. In further defense of the Identity Thesis, note that it is less parsimonious to claim that obligations are distinct from prescriptions than to claim that obligations are identical to prescriptions. According to (a version of) Occam’s razor, entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity (Baker 2004/2016).

One might object by using an analogy. Say that a circle in a given plane and a sphere are associated* exactly if they have both the same center and the same radius. The association* relation is a one-to-one correspondence between all circles in the given plane and certain spheres (namely, those spheres that are bisected by the given plane). Nevertheless, it would be fallacious to infer that circles are spheres: to distinguish circles from spheres is not to multiply entities beyond necessity. Similarly (the objection continues), it is necessary to distinguish obligations from prescriptions because obligations have properties that prescriptions lack (and vice versa). For example: (1) a person can have an obligation but cannot have a prescription (i.e., obligations can have owners but prescriptions cannot); (2) one obligation can be stronger than another but one prescription cannot be stronger than another; and (3) promises can create obligations but cannot create prescriptions.

In reply, I grant of course that my appeals to explanatory power and to parsimony do not provide a decisive argument for the Identity Thesis. Nevertheless, the above objections are less powerful than they might seem. To see this, consider a couple of analogies. (1) Proponents of the familiar view that propositions are sets of possible worlds can reply as follows to the objection that propositions can be true or false but sets cannot (cf. Merricks 2015: 94; Plantinga 1987: 206–8): sets of possible worlds can be true or false, even if other sets cannot. Similarly, I can reply as follows to the objection that obligations can have owners but prescriptions cannot: prescriptions that are obligations can have owners, even if other prescriptions cannot.51 (2) Proponents of the familiar view that reasons are facts can reply as follows to the objection that one reason can be stronger than another but one fact cannot be stronger than another: among facts that are reasons, one fact can be stronger (i.e., can be a stronger reason) than another. Similarly, I can reply as follows to the objection that one obligation can be stronger than another but one prescription cannot be stronger than another: among prescriptions that are obligations, one prescription can be stronger (i.e., can be a stronger obligation) than another. One might respond by demanding an explanation of why it sounds strange to say that one prescription is stronger than another. I reply that this sounds strange probably because the Identity Thesis is not obvious. (In fact, to my knowledge,

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51 According to Plantinga (1987: 207), (1) the claim that the null set is false is “obviously mistaken”: (2) “sets aren’t the sort of things that can be either true or false”. I reply that (2) does not follow from (1): even if the null set is not (true or) false, the set whose members are all and only those worlds at which it never rains may well be the false. Similarly, even if the prescription expressed by “disprove the Pythagorean theorem” has no owner, the prescription expressed by “donate blood” may well have an owner (namely, you—if you have promised to donate blood).
this thesis has never been proposed in the literature.) By analogy, saying that temperature is a mean value sounds strange probably because the identity between the temperature of a gas in equilibrium and the mean kinetic energy of the molecules that constitute the gas (cf. Nagel 1961/1979: 340–5; Needham 2009: 95–8; Sklar 1993: 351–4) is not obvious.

Consider now the objection that promises can create obligations but cannot create prescriptions; for example, if at noon you promise that you will abdicate (and before noon there is no reason for you to abdicate), then your obligation to abdicate is brought into existence (by your promise) at noon, but the prescription expressed by “abdicate” exists before noon (so the obligation is not identical to the prescription). Proponents of the Identity Thesis might reply by (1) claiming that your obligation to abdicate does exist before noon, and (2) trying to mitigate the implausibility of this claim by noting that the obligation is not in force (and thus you do not have it) before noon. This reply faces two problems: (a) it does not eliminate the implausibility of the above claim, and (b) it conflicts with the claim that, as a matter of conceptual necessity, an obligation exists at time \( t \) only if the obligation is in force at \( t \). This claim is supposed to capture the plausible idea that the concept of an obligation is normatively loaded: it has being in force “built into” it. I do not find these two problems decisive, but I will not say more in defense of the Identity Thesis. Instead, in what follows I switch gears, and I defend what I take to be a more plausible version of the Identity Thesis: a time-indexed version, which can avoid the above two problems.

### 4.2. Obligation phasalism and the time-indexed Identity Thesis

Before I formulate the time-indexed Identity Thesis, consider an analogy. If Paul’s widow is Paula and Paula exists before Paul dies, then so does Paul’s widow. Nevertheless, it is misleading to say, one day before Paul dies, that Paul’s widow exists: it is misleading to refer to a woman as a “widow” at a time at which the woman is not a widow. Similarly, if your obligation to abdicate is the prescription expressed by “abdicate” and the prescription exists before you promise to abdicate, then so does your obligation. Nevertheless, it is misleading to say, one day before you promise to abdicate, that your obligation to abdicate exists: it is misleading to refer to a prescription as an “obligation” at a time at which the prescription is not an obligation. I am relying here on the claim that whether something is an obligation can vary over time. More precisely: some entity that at some time is an obligation is not an obligation at every time at which it exists. Call this claim obligation phasalism, since it amounts to the claim that some entity is an obligation for only a phase of its existence. If obligation phasalism is true, then being an obligation...
is relative to time: nothing is an obligation timelessly, as opposed to being an obligation at a given time (or set of times, maybe including all times).\textsuperscript{55} (Compare: since whether a woman is a widow can vary over time, no woman is a widow timelessly, as opposed to being a widow at a given time or set of times.) But then, if obligation phasalism is true, what becomes of my results in the previous sections, which are formulated in terms of obligations simpliciter? I reply that my line of reasoning in the previous sections can be easily adapted (regardless of whether obligation phasalism is true) to support time-indexed versions of my results; to get these versions, replace “obligation” (in my formulations of the results) with “entity that at some time (or other) is an obligation”. For example, the time-indexed version of my result that every obligation has an associated prescription (§2.3) is the claim that every entity that at some time (or other) is an obligation has an associated prescription. Similarly, the time-indexed (version of the) Identity Thesis is the claim that every entity that at some time (or other) is an obligation is a prescription. (Equivalently: for any time, every entity that at that time is an obligation is a prescription.) Note that whether something is a prescription cannot vary over time (i.e., either is timeless or is relative to time but constant over time), and similarly for whether something is associated with something (as I argued in §2.3).

If the time-indexed Identity Thesis is true, then obligation phasalism is also true. To see this, reason contrapositively: if obligation phasalism is false (i.e., if everything that at some time is an obligation is an obligation at every time at which it exists), then, if (1) the prescription expressed by “abdicate” is an obligation at some time after you promise to abdicate, (2) it is also an obligation at every time (at which the prescription exists) before you promise to abdicate; but then the time-indexed Identity Thesis, which leads to (1), also leads to (2), and thus is false (because (2) is false). Similarly, consider the following claim, which is analogous to obligation phasalism but is formulated in terms of worlds instead of times: whether something is an obligation can vary across worlds. More precisely: some entity that at some world is an obligation is not an obligation at every world at which it exists.\textsuperscript{56} Call this claim obligation contingency. If the time-indexed Identity Thesis is true, then obligation contingency is also true. To see this, reason contrapositively: if obligation contingency is false (i.e., if everything that at some world is an obligation is an obligation at every world at which it exists), then, if (3) the prescription expressed by “abdicate” is an obligation at some world at which you promise to abdicate (e.g., the actual world), (4) it is also an obligation at every world at which (the prescription exists but) you do not promise to abdicate; but then the time-indexed Identity Thesis, which leads to (3), also leads to (4), and thus is false (because (4) is false).

I will argue now that the time-indexed Identity Thesis can avoid the two problems that I raised at the end of §4.1: if the thesis is true, then the two problems do not arise. I raised the two problems by considering the following claims (which proponents of the Identity Thesis—or of the time-indexed Identity Thesis—would be hard pressed to deny): your obligation to abdicate (1) exists before noon (i.e., before you promise to abdicate) but (2) is not in force before noon. The first

\textsuperscript{55} Strictly speaking, obligation phasalism (OP) entails that something is an obligation at a given time; OP is compatible with the claim that something (else) is an obligation timelessly, so OP does not entail that (OR) being an obligation is relative to time. Nevertheless, I take OR to be true if OP is true because I exclude from consideration as implausible the claim that something is an obligation at a given time but something else is an obligation timelessly.

\textsuperscript{56} Strictly speaking, I should prefix “at some world” and “at every world” with “at some time (or other)”, but I omit this qualification for simplicity.
problem was that (1) is implausible. I reply that (1) is not implausible if (as proponents of the time-indexed Identity Thesis can say, via obligation phasalism) your obligation to abdicate (which is the prescription expressed by “abdicate”) is not an obligation before noon. Compare: the claim that your favorite student exists at a time at which no one is a student is not implausible if your favorite student is not a student at that time.57 (Moreover, I accept that promises can create obligations: due to a promise, a prescription that was not an obligation can become an obligation. By analogy, wars can create widows: due to a war, a woman who was not a widow can become a widow. Cf. Ayers 1974: 128.) The second problem had to do with the plausible idea that (3) the concept of an obligation is normatively loaded: it has being in force “built into” it. The problem was that the conjunction of (1) with (2) conflicts with the following claim, which is supposed to capture (3): (4) as a matter of conceptual necessity, an obligation exists at time t only if the obligation is in force at t. I reply that, if the time-indexed Identity Thesis is true, then (3) is captured not by (4) (which is false if (1) and (2) are true), but by the following claim: (5) as a matter of conceptual necessity, a prescription is an obligation at time t only if the prescription is in force at t. Compare: the idea that the concept of a student has studying built into it is not captured by the false claim that, (4ʹ) as a matter of conceptual necessity, a student exists at time t only if the student is studying at t; it is instead captured by the claim that, (5ʹ) as a matter of conceptual necessity, a person is a student at time t only if the person is studying (at a college or university) at t. The time-indexed Identity Thesis and (5) jointly entail that, for any time t, an entity is an obligation at t only if it is a prescription that is in force at t. If one leaves implicit the relativization to times of being an obligation and of being in force, one can say more simply that every obligation is a prescription that is in force.58 Compare: every student is a person who is studying (where the relativization to times of being a student and of studying is left implicit).

Opponents of the time-indexed Identity Thesis might ask: why is the relationship between an obligation and its associated prescription analogous to the relationship between a student and the person who is the student, instead of being analogous to the relationship between a clay statue and the lump of clay from which the statue is formed? According to a common view, the statue does not exist at times (or worlds) at which the lump of clay does not have an appropriate shape;59 why not argue by analogy that the obligation does not exist at times (or worlds) at

57 Similarly, one might object to the (time-indexed) Identity Thesis by arguing that it is implausible to claim that your obligation to abdicate exists at a world at which the prescription expressed by “abdicate” exists but you do not promise to abdicate (and there is no other reason for you to abdicate). I reply that this claim is not implausible if (as proponents of the time-indexed Identity Thesis can say, via obligation contingency) your obligation to abdicate (which is the prescription expressed by “abdicate”) is not an obligation at that world. Compare: the claim that your favorite student exists at a world at which no one is a student is not implausible if your favorite student is not a student at that world.

58 It is natural for proponents of the time-indexed Identity Thesis to also accept the converse: every prescription that is in force is an obligation. One might ask: at which times (if any) is a given prescription in force (i.e., an obligation)? I reply that different normative theories will answer this question in different ways. For example, a normative theory might answer that a prescription is in force at a given time exactly if the satisfaction proposition of the prescription is more “valuable” at that time (in a sense specified by the theory) than the violation proposition of the prescription. My point is that answering the above question is a task for a normative theory, not for metaphysics, and thus lies beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, in this paper I may proceed on the basis of plausible claims about being in force concerning particular cases. For example, it is plausible that the prescription expressed by “abdicate” is typically in force shortly after but not shortly before you promise to abdicate.

59 According to Wasserman (2009/2017), this kind of view is “extremely popular”. Nevertheless, there are also many other views. In particular, Wasserman mentions the following view (which is analogous to obligation phasalism): “the thing which is (currently) a statue may have existed prior to the sculpting, but it was not (then) a statue. … Similarly, the thing which is (currently) a statue may survive being squashed, but it will not (then) be a statu-
which the prescription is not in force? I reply that such an argument by analogy would be weak, and I am not myself appealing to such an argument. The point of my analogies between obligations and students (or widows) was to clarify the time-indexed Identity Thesis and its implications, not to argue for that thesis by analogy. My argument for that thesis parallels my argument for the Identity Thesis in §4.1: the time-indexed Identity Thesis provides a simple explanation of the time-indexed (version of the) Correspondence Result, and also avoids multiplying entities beyond necessity. My case for the time-indexed Identity Thesis is stronger than my case (in §4.1) for the Identity Thesis because, as I argued in the previous paragraph, the time-indexed Identity Thesis can avoid the two problems for the Identity Thesis that I raised at the end of §4.1. For example, the claim that your obligation to abdicate exists before noon is implausible if the prescription expressed by “abdicate” is an obligation at every time at which it exists (and proponents of the Identity Thesis would be hard pressed to deny this, since the Identity Thesis is formulated in terms of obligations simpliciter), but—to repeat—the above claim is not implausible if your obligation to abdicate is not an obligation before noon (and proponents of the time-indexed Identity Thesis can maintain this, via obligation phasalism). In sum, (1) the time-indexed Identity Thesis is more plausible than the Identity Thesis, and (2) I do have an argument for the time-indexed Identity Thesis, which is not an argument by analogy.

5. Conclusion

According to a traditional view on the nature of obligations, obligations are distinct from prescriptions, and whether something is an obligation cannot vary over time (or across worlds): everything that at some time (at some world) is an obligation is an obligation at every time (at every world) at which it exists. In this paper, I defended a novel alternative to this traditional view, namely the time-indexed Identity Thesis: every entity that at some time (or other) is an obligation is a prescription. As I argued, if this thesis is true, then whether something is an obligation can vary over time (obligation phasalism) and across worlds (obligation contingency). A stepping stone to my defense of the time-indexed Identity Thesis was my defense of the thesis that obligations are individuated in the coarse-grained way: no distinct obligations have both the same satisfaction proposition and the same violation proposition. This thesis on the individuation of obligations is of independent interest, and can be accepted even if one rejects my thesis on the nature of obligations. And even if one rejects both theses, one can still find useful the methodology that I introduced in this paper for addressing questions in the metaphysics of obligations: my methodology consists in examining the relationship between obligations and their associated prescriptions. I hope that this paper demonstrates the fruitfulness of this methodology.

Appendix: Moral obligation prescriptivism

The time-indexed Identity Thesis is not a purely metaethical thesis: it is about all obligations (including, for example, legal and epistemic ones), not only about moral ones. Call moral obligation prescriptivism the following purely metaethical consequence of the time-indexed Identity Thesis.


60 To be explicit, the time-indexed Correspondence Result is the claim that the association relation is a one-to-one correspondence between all entities that at some time (or other) are obligations and certain prescriptions. This claim entails that, for any time $t$, the association relation is one-to-one correspondence between all entities that are obligations at $t$ and certain prescriptions (namely, I claim, those prescriptions that are in force at $t$).
Thesis: every entity that at some time (or other) is a moral obligation is a prescription. This metaethical thesis is neutral on the metaphysical status of moral obligations because it is neutral on the metaphysical status of prescriptions (§2.1). However, it is plausible that prescriptions (like propositions) exist even if they are never expressed (see note 1), and even if there are no people; if so, then prescriptions exist “mind-independently”, and for this reason one might claim that moral obligation prescriptivism is a form of moral realism (cf. Joyce 2007/2016). Nevertheless, moral obligation prescriptivism is compatible with at least two forms of moral anti-realism. (1) Recall (from note 58) that whether a prescription is an obligation (at a given time) depends on whether the prescription is in force (at that time). But being in force may be mind-dependent: moral obligation prescriptivism is compatible with non-objectivism (e.g., constructivism) in metaethics (cf. Bagnoli 2011/2017). (2) I assumed that some moral obligations exist (at some times), and thus that some moral sentences (that can be used to assert the existence of moral obligations) are true—and thus also that the moral error theory is false. But it does not follow that moral sentences express (only) beliefs or propositions: moral obligation prescriptivism is compatible with forms of moral non-cognitivism—like quasi-realism (Blackburn 1993), including plan-expressivism (Gibbard 2003: 18–9)—that take moral sentences to be true or false in a deflationary or minimalist sense (van Roojen 2004/2016).

Compare moral obligation prescriptivism with prescriptivism as traditionally understood in metaethics—or traditional prescriptivism for short. According to an early form of traditional prescriptivism, “a value statement is nothing else than a command in a misleading grammatical form” (Carnap 1935: 24). I take the view to be that moral sentences (e.g., “It is morally forbidden to lie”) typically function like imperative sentences (e.g., “Do not lie”): they typically express only prescriptions. According to a later form of traditional prescriptivism, namely universal prescriptivism (Hare 1952, 1963, 1981, 1991, 1997), moral sentences are both universalizable and (typically) prescriptive: they “contain an element of meaning which serves to prescribe or direct actions” (Hare 2000). Although moral obligation prescriptivism is compatible with both forms of traditional prescriptivism, it is distinct from them: it is a thesis about the nature of moral obligations, not about universalizability or about the meaning or the function of moral sentences. It is true that, if moral obligations are prescriptions, then they are typically expressed by imperative sentences. But it does not follow that moral sentences typically express moral obligations: moral obligation prescriptivism is compatible with the cognitivist claim that moral sentences typically express only beliefs or propositions (instead of obligations or prescriptions).

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