



Reasons and Abilities: Some Preliminaries (2013)

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Reasons and Abilities: Some Preliminaries[†]

JOHN GARDNER

The thesis that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ – I will call it ‘OC’ for short – is often traced back to Kant. The attribution is correct but misleading. Those who invoke OC today typically argue that, because A lacks the ability to ϕ , it cannot be the case that A ought to ϕ . What one ought to do cannot be established without first establishing what one can do. But Kant invoked OC to argue in the opposite direction. His thought was that, because A ought to ϕ , it cannot be the case that A lacks the ability to ϕ . What one can do cannot be established without first establishing what one ought to do. In Kant’s own words:

We must not determine ethical duties according to our estimate of man’s power to fulfill the [moral] law; on the contrary we must estimate man’s power by the standard of the [moral] law, which commands categorically. Hence we must appraise this power on the basis of our rational knowledge of what men should be ... , not on the basis of our empirical knowledge of men as they are.¹

I will return later to the substance of Kant’s proposal. But the first lesson of his remark is that any defence of OC needs to begin with some careful explanation of its meaning.

[†] Earlier versions were presented at the Institute of Philosophy, University of London (2006), at the Australian National University (2006), and at the University of Manchester (2007). For valuable comments I’m grateful to many people who were present on these occasions, and in particular to John Broome, Kimberley Brownlee, Joseph Raz, and Nic Southwood.

¹ Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue* (ed Gregor, 1964), 66.

For a start, Kant reveals some important problems with ‘can’. For the purposes of applying OC to me, are we interested in what I am able to do as things stand, or in what I would be able to do if only my will were not weak, or in what is humanly possible even though I would never personally be able to do it, etc.? Kant also highlights some issues about ‘implies’. Is the relationship genuinely one of entailment? Is OC a logical truth or is it perhaps a moral doctrine? Finally, Kant exposes some questions about ‘ought’. Are the things that we ought to do, for OC’s purposes, all and only those things that we have a duty to do? Or should the ‘ought’ in OC be interpreted more generously? In what follows I will distinguish some rival interpretations of OC, and then focus on just one of those interpretations in order to assess OC’s soundness when so interpreted. This is only a first tentative step in what possibly merits a book’s worth of discussion.

1. The variety of oughts

Here is a more formal statement of the thesis that interests us:

(OC) A ought to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

In Kant’s rendition of OC, the relevant ‘ought’ is the ‘ought’ of duty. Thus for Kant and his followers OC means:

(OC1) A has a duty to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

Having a duty, as Kant says, means having a reason to act that is both mandatory and categorical.² But in some contexts the word ‘ought’ may also be used to signify the existence of reasons more

² Strictly speaking, the reason to act is not the duty. Rather the reason to act is the fact that one has the duty. But this makes no difference here.

generally, including reasons that are not categorical and not mandatory. ‘You ought to try this *carpaccio di zucchini*’ does not mean, normally, that you have a duty to try it, but only that you have some reason to do so (e.g. that it is tasty, that a lot of work went into making it). Whatever one has any reason to do is something that, in a very loose sense of ‘ought’, one ought to do. So OC may be interpreted (a lot more sweepingly) to mean:

(OC2) A has a reason to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

By OC2, if I am unable to help those in need, I have no reason to do so. By OC1, if I am unable to help those in need I have no duty to do so but I may still have a reason to do so.

Perhaps most commonly, ‘ought’ is used to express a judgment about the balance or totality of reasons, about what is to be done all-things-considered. ‘You ought to be at work today, not lying around on the sofa’ does not deny that you may have reasons to lie around on the sofa. It merely asserts that, inasmuch you have reasons to lie around on the sofa, they are defeated by reasons you also have to go to work. In that sense, going to work is something that you ought to do and lying around on the sofa is something that you ought not to do. Interpreting ‘ought’ in this way, OC means:

(OC3) A has an undefeated reason to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

I have expressed OC3 in terms of ‘undefeated’ reasons to leave room for the possibility of incommensurable or equal options. Sometimes there is no unique solution to the question of what is to be done all-things-considered. There is at least one undefeated reason for each of several rival actions. More than one of the rival actions could be justified. Then there is a sense in which each way forward ought (all-things-considered) to be pursued. Is this verdict compatible with OC3 itself? If OC3 is right one can have an undefeated reason to do only that which one has the ability to

do. But clearly (by the definition of ‘rival’) one lacks the ability to perform both of two rival actions. So doesn’t it follow from OC3 that one does not have an undefeated reason to perform both of them? True enough, but this does not settle whether one has an undefeated reason to perform *each* of them. When confronted with a choice of two rival actions, one may have the ability to perform each of them, albeit not both together. Correspondingly, by OC3, one may have an undefeated reason to perform each of them, albeit not both together.

Nevertheless, some might prefer to reserve talk of what ought to be done for the narrower class of cases in which there is a *unique* solution to the question of what is to be done all-things-considered. Such people would say that where more than one of the ways forward would be justified, there is nothing that ought to be done. So for them OC would mean:

(OC3′) A has a conclusive reason to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

By a conclusive reason I mean an undefeated reason that is not in conflict with any other undefeated reasons. I have labeled this interpretation of OC as OC3′ (rather than OC4) to mark the fact that it involves only a modest modification of OC3. It does not differ from OC3 except in respect of cases involving incommensurability or equality among competing undefeated reasons, and hence among rival justified actions.

OC1 and OC3′ are sometimes run together. An unholy alliance of Benthamite and Kantian influences tends to encourage the confusion of the two. On the Benthamite view, one has a duty to perform that action, the reasons for which outweigh (and hence in Benthamite thinking defeat) the reasons in favour of any rival action. Thus wherever there is a conclusive reason to ϕ there is by the same token a duty to ϕ . On the Kantian view, reasons of duty defeat all other reasons and cannot be defeated even by other duties (for duties by their nature cannot conflict). Thus wherever there is a duty to ϕ there is by the same token a

conclusive reason to ϕ . For Benthamites one has a duty to do whatever one has a conclusive reason to do; for Kantians one has a conclusive reason to do whatever one has a duty to do. The combined influence of these two views has been enough to permit contemporary philosophers to slip unnoticed between talk of ought (=duty) and talk of ought (=conclusive reason).³ Thus OC1 and OC3' are rarely kept distinct. Yet there is a gulf between them. Sometimes, if one is to do the only thing one is justified in doing, one must fail in one's duty. And often one has no duty to do the only thing that one is justified in doing. A case of the first type: Fred may have no justified option but to break his promise (failing in his duty) to meet Ted for lunch at noon, if, on the way, he stops to save Ned from drowning in the canal (even though his doing so is beyond the call of duty). A case of the second type: if the rain is heavy, Edna may have no justified alternative to taking her umbrella out with her, but that does not make it her duty to do so. Even if you don't accept my judgments in these cases, this plainly has nothing to do with the *concept* of duty or the *concept* of a conclusive reason. My verdicts in these cases may be mistaken but they are not unintelligible. So there is no warrant for running the two concepts together, and thereby confusing OC1 with OC3'. The only thing that OC1 and OC3' have in common is that they are both versions of OC that are narrower than the very sweeping OC2.

A second (sometimes compounding) misunderstanding of OC3' confuses what one has conclusive reason to do with what one would be blameworthy for not doing. Thus OC3' becomes

(OC4) A is blameworthy in not ϕ ing only if A has the ability to ϕ .

³ Among those treating the two as equivalent are Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), 229, and Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (1989), 64ff.

OC3' admittedly entails OC4. One is blameworthy in not ϕ ing only if one has a conclusive reason to ϕ . But OC4 does not entail OC3'. It is possible to have a conclusive reason to ϕ without being blameworthy in not ϕ ing. How so? If one has a conclusive reason for ϕ ing, then one has by that token no justification for not ϕ ing. But one may nevertheless have a sufficient *excuse* for not ϕ ing, which equally eliminates one's blameworthiness. Possibly some people are drawn to OC because they believe that some or all of people's inabilities are capable of providing them with excuses. This is a possible reason for endorsing OC4. But it is not a possible reason for endorsing OC3'. One needs an excuse for not ϕ ing only if one ought to have ϕ ed in the sense given by OC3', i.e. only if one was not justified in not ϕ ing. Thus if one relies on one's inability to ϕ as an excuse for not ϕ ing, one is already conceding that, in spite of that same inability, one ought to have ϕ ed in the sense given by OC3'.

In my view OC4 – also known as the 'Principle of Alternate Possibilities'⁴ – is not best regarded as a version of OC at all. There is no natural sense of 'ought' such that not doing as one ought automatically makes one blameworthy. In all the natural senses of 'ought' – those invoked in OC1, OC2, OC3, and OC3' – it may be the case that one does not do as one ought to do, and yet that one is excused, and hence not to blame. In the debate over OC, blameworthiness is a red herring.

Be that as it may, in what follows I will not be investigating the possible excusatory relevance of inabilities.⁵ So I will ignore OC4 as a possible interpretation of OC. I will also ignore OC3 and OC3'. The Kantian OC1, which throws up many extra questions, I will postpone for another day. My interest in what follows will be in the soundness of OC2 only: in the relevance of

⁴ Harry Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969), 829.

⁵ I reflected on this relevance in 'The Gist of Excuses', which now forms chapter 6 of my book *Offences and Defences* (2007).

one's inability to ϕ in determining whether one has any reason at all to ϕ , never mind whether it is undefeated.

2. *The variety of cans*

The previous section documented some different senses of 'ought'. Are there similarly different senses of 'can'? Possibly. There are certainly different senses of 'ability', which is the word I used in formulating the variants of OC above. OC2 could be interpreted, for example, in any of the following ways:

(OC2.1) A has a reason to ϕ only if A has the capacity to ϕ .

(OC2.2) A has a reason to ϕ only if A has the opportunity to ϕ .

(OC2.3) A has a reason to ϕ only if A has both the capacity and the opportunity to ϕ .

In the terminology I will favour, OC2.1, OC2.2 and OC2.3 set different *baselines* of ability. In advancing OC2.1 as an interpretation of OC2 one disregards, as consistent with A's having a reason to ϕ , some impediments to A's ϕ ing - namely those impediments that belong to A's circumstances rather than to A herself. If instead one advances OC2.2 as an interpretation of OC2 one conversely disregards those impediments that belong to A herself rather than to her circumstances. If one advances OC2.3 one does not disregard either set of impediments. Thereby one successively shifts the baseline relative to which A's ability is assessed. One may read OC2.3 as setting (what may be called) the *absolute* baseline of ability. No impediments at all are disregarded. All possible impediments to A's ϕ ing, whether in A herself or in her circumstances, are such that, if A encounters them, A has no reason to ϕ .

All ascriptions of ability are relative to a baseline.⁶ So the question arises: What baseline for ability should we use if we want to give OC2 its best shot at being sound? Should we use the absolute baseline, disregarding no impediments at all? Reading OC2 this way faces us with a familiar problem. The problem is that if we include all impediments to A's ϕ ing in deciding whether A has the ability to ϕ , we have to include whatever makes it the case that A does not ϕ . We have to include A's disinclination, her competing goals, her bad temper, her ignorance, her caprice, her difficult situation, her bad luck, etc. The upshot is that A has the ability to ϕ only if A does ϕ . But this renders OC2 absurd. For now OC2 says that nobody ever has any imaginable reasons to do anything that they do not do. This cannot be true. That is because it is part of the very idea of a reason that one might imaginably fail to do what the reason would have one do – that one's actions could be assessed relative to the reason and found wanting. So the upshot of reading the absolute baseline of ability into OC2 is that, according to OC2, nobody ever has any reasons to do anything. This is a *reductio*. Whatever OC2 says, it must allow that people sometimes have reasons to do things. So the relevant baseline of ability, for the purpose of OC2, must be one other than the absolute baseline which eliminates all the gap between what A has the ability to do and what A actually does.

Indeed, one might say that this absolute baseline of ability isn't strictly speaking a baseline of *ability* at all. Arguably it is part of the very idea of an ability that A might not do what he has the ability to do. If that is true then, whenever we think about whether A has the ability to ϕ , we must already be disregarding at least some impediments to A's ϕ ing. That being so, it was unfair to OC2.3 to read it as allowing the disregard of no impediments at all to A's ϕ ing. There must be some possible impediments to

⁶ Austin, 'Ifs and Cans', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 42 (1956), 109.

As ϕ ing that, in the relevant sense, negate neither A's capacity to ϕ nor A's opportunity to ϕ . For otherwise A only has both the capacity and the opportunity to ϕ when A actually does ϕ , and OC2.3 is then rendered absurd by the argument rehearsed above. So we need some principle for selecting, among the impediments to A's ϕ ing, those that deprive her of the ability to ϕ in the sense required by OC2. The answer 'all impediments do so', the absolute baseline, is ruled out from the start.

What is the principle? How are we to decide which impediments to disregard in thinking about OC2? Perhaps we should work in from the opposite direction. Which impediments to A's ϕ ing are such that, on any plausible view, if A encounters those impediments, she has no reason to ϕ ? We have already had one pointer. Whatever OC2 says, we noted, it must allow that people sometimes have reasons to do things. But OC2 need not allow that, for example, daffodils sometimes have reasons to do things. Daffodils, like people, are agents with goals.⁷ They push up towards the light and away from the earth. But neither their goals nor their actions in pursuit of those goals are answerable to reasons because they, daffodils, lack the capacity to engage with reasons. At its most basic, the capacity to engage with reasons is the capacity to regard certain facts as militating in favour of or against what one does. Daffodils pursue the light but they do not regard the fact of the light as militating in favour of its pursuit. They do not have the cognitive capacity to regard anything as anything. Lacking this capacity to engage with reasons, daffodils are also not subject to reasons: their actions are not to be assessed relative to reasons and cannot be found rationally wanting. On any plausible view, then, lack of the capacity to engage with reasons makes it the case that one lacks reasons, including the reason to ϕ . Only rational beings have a reason to ϕ (or to do

⁷ 'Goal' is sometimes used to refer to a personal goal, the intention-object of an intentional system. I am using it here more broadly to refer to a *telos* of any teleological system, which need not be an intentional system.

anything else).⁸ This suggests we should begin with the following interpretation (or proposed implication) of OC2:

(OC2.1') A has a reason to ϕ only if (*qua* rational being) A has the capacity to ϕ .

There are various obscurities in OC2.1'. In particular, one may suspect that the parenthetical '*qua* rational being' does not set the relevant baseline of ability but rather sets a limit on the range of possible As to which OC applies. Thus:

(OC2.1'a) A, a rational being, has a reason to ϕ only if A has the capacity to ϕ .

This is really just OC2.1 with one of its logical implications parenthetically spelt out, viz. that by its nature it applies only to

⁸ You may say that this line of thought trades on an ambiguity in the phrase 'answerable to reasons'. Daffodils themselves are clearly not answerable, in the sense that they are not responsible for what they do. They owe nobody any justification or excuse. This follows straightforwardly from their lack of ability to engage with reasons. If one cannot engage with reasons then one cannot offer them in defence of what one does. But it does not follow, you may say, that one's goals and actions as a daffodil do not answer to reasons in the different sense of being open to appraisal in respect of their conformity or nonconformity with reasons, and hence, on occasions, to being found rationally wanting. Couldn't one, as a person, wish that one were a daffodil? Aren't there reasons to wish that one lived that simpler daffodil life, a life free from the capacity to engage with reasons? If so, doesn't it follow that daffodil lives – daffodil goals and actions – can be appraised in respect of their rational appeal, and hence their conformity with reasons? These questions pose the most radical challenge of all to OC2. But they go too far. Reasons have two roles. First they are there to be conformed with. Second they are there to be followed (=used for guidance). It is a condition of having a reason that one's conforming to it by following it is logically possible. Daffodils do not meet the second condition and therefore do not have reasons to do as they do.

rational beings. Alternatively, if the parenthetical in OC2.1' really does bear on the baseline of ability, OC2.1' means just this:

(OC2.1'b) A has a reason to ϕ only if a rational being has the capacity to ϕ and A is a rational being.

This formulation seems to be full of redundancy. Once again it just seems to reduce to OC2.1. Surely OC2.1'b itself licenses one to substitute 'A' for 'a rational being' and end up back at

(OC2.1) A has a reason to ϕ only if A has the capacity to ϕ .

Or does it? That is really not so clear. For maybe OC2.1'b means something more like this:

(OC2.1'c) A has a reason to ϕ only if at least one conceivable rational being has the capacity to ϕ and A is a rational being.

This variant on OC2 departs radically from OC2.1. It would have us disregard impediments to A's ϕ ing that are personal to A, rather than being the standard incidents of her status as a rational being. Thus the mere fact that A's personal capacities fall short of those of an ideal rational being, such that she lacks the personal capacity to ϕ , does not mean that she lacks the ability to ϕ in the sense required by OC2. This gives us the Kantian interpretation of 'ability' in OC2. It sets the baseline of ability 'on the basis of our rational knowledge of what men should be ... , not on the basis of our empirical knowledge of men as they are.'

It is not hard to see why, in interpreting OC2, one needs to disregard at least some personal incapacities of A which mark her out as a less-than-ideal rational being. Cowardice, for example, is an incapacity that marks its bearer out as a less-than-ideal rational being. Being a coward I am incapable of facing up to certain fraught situations. But it cannot follow that I lack a reason to face up to those fraught situations. For if I lack a reason to face up to those fraught situations, then it cannot be the case that I am a

coward for failing to face up to them. More generally, I cannot be found wanting as rational being for not engaging properly with reasons that I do not have. It follows that incapacities like cowardice have to be disregarded when interpreting OC2. What counts, for these purposes, as an incapacity *like* cowardice? Moral faults and limitations, as well as shortfalls of skill. Also weakness of will. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, these really are incapacities. Skills and moral virtues and willpower are capacities for acting well, and the corresponding failings are the corresponding incapacities. Yet these incapacities are not incapacities that prevent one from having reasons to do what they make one incapable of doing. On the contrary: these incapacities are distinguished from some others precisely in being incapacities to do what one has reason to do.⁹

But notice that OC2.1'c goes much further than this in having us disregard A's personal incapacities. It requires us to disregard, in applying OC2, not only moral shortcomings and similar deficiencies that reflect ill on their possessor, but also impediments to her rational perfection that are not her fault at all. Some otherwise rational beings suffer from partial or localised attenuations or disturbances of their rationality that affect their responsibility for some or all of their actions and that make it inappropriate to judge them (for better or for worse) in respect of those actions. Doesn't the standard of the ideally rational agent then come down to meet them, as opposed to finding them wanting? Doesn't their incapacity negate, within limits, the application to such people of reasons that would otherwise be applicable to them, such that their actions do not fall to be assessed and found deficient relative to those reasons? Suppose that A has a pathological compulsion to wash her hands, one that makes her incapable of not washing them. We might be tempted

⁹ As opposed to being incapacities to do what, depending on the circumstances, one may or may not have reason to do.

to say that, thanks to her incapacity, A lacks a reason not to wash her hands. But I doubt whether this is the right instinct. A clearly has a reason to overcome her compulsion. She has a reason to seek treatment. Is this a reason to acquire reasons not to wash her hands that she does not currently have? Or is it a reason to acquire the capacity to conform to reasons not to wash her hands that she already has? The first explanation makes little sense. If A has no reason not to wash her hands, it is hard to see how she comes to have a reason to overcome her compulsion to do so. A's reason to overcome the compulsion to wash her hands derives from a reason she already has not to wash her hands. Like the rest of us, she has a reason to do whatever would enable her to conform to any reason she has. Her first step in coming to conform to the reason she has not to wash her hands is to give herself the capacity to conform to it. So lacking the capacity not to wash her hands – even though the explanation is pathological – cannot possibly mean that she lacks the reason not to wash her hands (unless the pathology makes her into the kind of being who cannot have reasons to do anything at all).

If we doubt this it may be because we are failing to distinguish OC2 from OC4 (which I suggested should not strictly speaking be thought of as a variant of OC at all). We are assuming that if A ought to wash her hands then she must be blameworthy for not doing so. Not only her actions but also she herself must be found rationally wanting. But the fact that she is not responsible for washing her hands means precisely that this inference is blocked. Not being responsible, A does not owe any justification or excuse for her nonconformity with whatever reasons she has not to wash her hands. She is not held to the normal standards of rationality whereby one needs to have had reasons for not conforming to reasons. Her hand washing is not her fault even if she has no reason at all for doing it. But it does not follow that she does not have reasons for not doing it, nor that her actions of hand-washing are not to be assessed relative to those reasons. In short: the standard of the ideal rational being

comes down to meet A in respect of how she *uses* reasons; but it does not come down to meet her in respect of which reasons she *has*. A always has, as OC2.1'c suggests, the same reasons to act that she would have were she an ideally rational being. That, it seems to me, is the right baseline of ability to use.

3. *Extending the argument*

In assessing OC2 and its variants, I have so far been focusing on impediments to A's ϕ ing that lie in her cognitive and volitional functioning. But we are also interested in what may be called *physical* inabilities. OC2.1'c is vague on the subject of these. That is because it is not clear whether it attaches any ideal physical capacities to the ideal rational agent. Interpreted in a starkly Kantian way it should not. For Kant, the ideal rational being is only ideal in respect of cognition and volition, and has no distinctive physical properties. We should not follow Kant in this. We should think of rational agents as embodied agents whose capacities include physical capacities for action, and we should consider how OC2.1'c might apply to these capacities as well as their cognitive and volitional capacities.

We already have a line of thought to help us, which figured in our discussion of the compulsive hand-washer. Why does the compulsive hand-washer have a reason to seek treatment for his compulsion? I favoured the simple and obvious explanation: He already has a reason to stop washing his hands as much as he does, and getting his compulsion treated will enable him to conform better to that reason. This being so, it cannot be the case that his incapacity to stop washing his hands so much prevents him from having a reason to stop washing his hands so much. We can make much the same point with physical disabilities. Why do people in wheelchairs have reasons to lobby for modification of buses to accommodate their wheelchairs? The simple and obvious explanation is that they already have reasons to travel by bus, and that getting buses modified will enable them to conform better to

this reason in future than they currently can. That being so, it cannot be the case that their current inability to travel by bus means that they currently lack a reason to travel by bus. On the contrary: their reason to travel by bus is their reason to overcome the impediment to their bus travel that is represented by (take your pick) the bus, the wheelchair, or the lack of limb function that makes the wheelchair necessary. It is important to give this list of impediments to make clear that nothing turns, in this line of thought, on whether the inability to use buses is cast as a lack of opportunity or a lack of capacity. Whether we think of it as a lack of opportunity or a lack of capacity, the simple and obvious reason to overcome it is the reason that the wheelchair-user already has to do things that, thanks to that lack of opportunity or lack of capacity, she is currently unable to do.

Which physical capacities should we attribute to the ideal rational being in setting the baseline of ability? Should we attribute to her the ability to leap over the stars, such that (consistently with OC2.1'c) the rest of us could have reasons to leap over the stars? Should we attribute to her the ability to travel back in time, such that (consistently with OC2.1'c) the rest of us could have reason to travel back in time? Should we attribute to her the ability to give birth to herself, such that (consistently with OC2.1'c) the rest of us could have reason to give birth to ourselves? It is pretty clear that the last of these abilities cannot be attributed to any rational being, or indeed to any being, for it is logically impossible to give birth to oneself. However, beyond that it is hard to know what to say. The problem comes of the Kantian manoeuvre of abstracting the rational being from the human being. Really, the human being is the embodied rational being that interests us for the purpose of interpreting and assessing OC. So let's try reinterpreting OC2.1'c as

(OC2.1'd) A has a reason to ϕ only if at least one conceivable human being has the capacity to ϕ and A is a human being.

Now things become a little clearer. If no conceivable human being has the ability to leap over the stars, none of us has reason to do so. If no conceivable human being has the ability to travel back in time, none of us has reason to do so. On the other hand, even if it is inconceivable that he personally will do it, someone permanently dependent on a wheelchair for mobility could have reasons to run a four-minute mile or to climb Mount Everest. Regrettably, of course, he will not be able to do these things for as long as medical science finds no way to eliminate his disability. Why is this regrettable? Precisely because his reasons to do such things are still there waiting for him even though his disability prevents him from doing them. These pursuits are humanly possible and that is the relevant ability baseline for establishing whether people in general, including people permanently dependent on wheelchairs, could have reasons to do them.

David Copp objects to the existence of reasons such as these on the ground of their *pointlessness*.¹⁰ It strikes him as wasteful of rational energy that people would have reasons for action that they cannot ever hope to conform to. But there need be no waste of rational energy involved. A reason to do something is not a reason to try to do it. One's reason to do something yields a derivative reason to try to do it only if, by trying to do it, one will help oneself to do it. Maybe Copp has a picture of wheelchair-users uselessly struggling to run the four minute miles that, as I claim, they might well have reason to run. Or he sees them uselessly trying to push their way through too-small bus doors in order to make the bus journeys that, by my line of thought, they already have reason to make. Such endeavours would admittedly be irrational. Wheelchair users have no reason to *try* to travel by bus while their wheelchairs still cannot fit through the doors. They only have a reason to travel by bus.

¹⁰ Copp, "'Ought' implies 'can', blameworthiness, and the principle of alternate possibilities', *Analysis* 68 (2008), 67 at 71ff.

What that reason yields by way of derivative reason is not a reason to try to travel by bus right now, but rather a reason to lobby for improvements to buses (or improvements to wheelchairs, or improvements to surgical reconstruction of their disabled limbs) so that they can indeed travel by bus. If their lobbying succeeds in their own lifetimes, they will give themselves, for the first time, reasons to try to travel by bus derived from their reasons to do so. Likewise, the reasons that wheelchair users already have to run a four minute mile give them reasons to lobby for investment in new technologies that might allow for limb regeneration or spinal reconnection. Once such new technologies exist and have been applied to them, the relevant wheelchair users may start to acquire reasons to *try* to run the four-minute mile derived from their reasons to run it. But, without waiting for that day to arrive, they already have reasons to run it even though they lack reasons to try to do so.

4. *Phiing and trying*

These comments bring out another quite common confusion about OC. Often OC is interpreted to mean

(OTCS) A ought to try to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

And by the same token OC2 becomes

(OTCS2) A has reason to try to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

These ‘ought to try’ implies ‘can succeed’ theses (OTCS for short) are far removed from the original OC theses of which they are supposed to constitute interpretations. That one ought to ϕ does not entail or even suggest that one ought to try to ϕ . That one has reason to ϕ does not entail or even suggest that one has a reason to try to ϕ . So it is perfectly possible that having the ability

to ϕ is a necessary condition of having a reason to try to ϕ even if it is not a necessary condition of having a reason to ϕ .

In fact, having the ability to ϕ is not even a condition of having a reason to try to ϕ . So OTCS2 is not only far removed from OC2. OTCS2 is also false. The correct thesis of which it is a poor approximation is this one:

(OTCS2') A has a reason to try to ϕ derived from A's reason to ϕ only if A has the ability to ϕ .

One could always have independent reasons to try to ϕ that are not derived from one's reasons to ϕ . There can be reasons to try by way of symbolic gesture, for example, or in search of a reward for effort. Contrary to OTCS2, having the ability to ϕ is not a necessary condition of having such independent reasons to try to ϕ . But as OTCS2' says, having the ability to ϕ is indeed a necessary condition of having a reason to try to ϕ that is derivative of one's reason to ϕ . That is because, if one lacks the ability to ϕ , trying to ϕ is futile so far as one's reason to ϕ is concerned. Trying to ϕ when one is unable to do so will not contribute to one's ϕ ing and so will not contribute to one's conforming to one's reason to ϕ . Thus one cannot rely on one's reason to ϕ in making a rational case for one's trying to ϕ . Yet still one has, as OTCS2' makes clear, a reason to ϕ .

I am inclined to think that much enthusiasm for OC2, read with an absolute baseline of ability, comes of the confusion between OC2 and OTCS2'. For the purpose of OTCS2', an absolute baseline of ability is indeed the correct baseline. Anything at all that will prevent one from ϕ ing, even if it lies in one's own bad character, blocks the derivation of a reason to try to ϕ from a reason to ϕ . This is easily misunderstood as the thesis OC2.3 that anything at all that will prevent one from ϕ ing deprives one of a reason to ϕ . In fact this last thesis, as I have tried to suggest, is far from the truth.