# FP OIC NC

## Framing

**Ought implies can is a method used to test a moral command.  The argument is simply that if you can’t do something you cannot be morally obligated to do that thing**

**Professor Theodore Gracyk explains**

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Many **philosophers use the principle "Ought implies can" as a basic test of moral obligation**. If something is a moral obligation (a duty), then we ought (should) do it. The importance of this idea might not be obvious. However, by a basic rule of logic called contraposition, we can turn the principle around, into this second principle: "Can't implies ought not." In other words, **if you can't do x, then you have no duty to do x**. (And "can't" means you really can't do x because x is impossible, not just that you don't like the results of x.)  **It** also **means that we should not blame people for failing to do what they cannot** possibly **do**.  Seen in this way, **the principle tells us that our obligations are restricted to what is** humanly **possible. The real world puts a limit on ethical responsibility**. For example, if a kitten is stuck in a tree, then you would be wrong to insist that Pat has a moral obligation to levitate into the air and rescue the kitten. Being human, Pat cannot levitate, so Pat has no such obligation. To take a more realistic example, if there are so many patients suffering from a fatal disease that doctors cannot treat them all, then doctors have no moral obligation to treat them all. Another implication of the principle is that changes in real-world circumstances can cancel some obligations.  For example, if I promised to meet you for lunch, then I have an obligation to do so. But if I'm driving to meet you for lunch and I get into an accident, I get knocked unconscious, and the paramedics throw me in an ambulance and drive me away, so that I cannot meet you for lunch when I promised, then I did nothing wrong. This implication leads some to object that we can remove obligations by purposely getting ourselves into a situation where we cannot do what we are obligated to do (e.g., the court orders Frank to pay child support, and Frank goes to Vegas and loses every cent he has by continuously betting on red at the roulette wheel -- since Frank now cannot pay the child support, Fred has no obligation to do so). But this objection gets it wrong. If x is an obligation for person a, but x depends on doing y, then if y is under a's control, then a has an obligation to do y. (BECAUSE Frank was obligated to pay child support, he was therefore obligated NOT to go to Vegas and gamble away the money!) Do not confuse "x is impossible" with the closely related question of x's having morally objectionable consequences. That issue is covered by the [Doctrine of Double Effect](http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/phil%20115/doubleEffect.htm).  Do not confuse "ought implies can" with "can implies ought." The fact that one can do something is no evidence that one should do it. (I can cause disgust by teaching class while eating fried chicken feet. It does not follow that I should eat fried chicken feet while teaching class.) One of the reasons that we engage in ethical thinking is to choose among our options. BACKGROUND: Immanuel Kant seems to have been the first philosopher to explicitly formulate[s] the principle: **"since reason commands that such actions should take place, it must be possible for them to take place**" (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A807/B835, Kemp Smith translation)

**Ethical theories that command the impossible are poor moral theories.  Obligations to do something only apply when we are capable of doing that thing and if the action commanded will be effective at achieving the desired ends.**

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He completed his MA and PhD in economics at George Mason University and received his A.B. in economics and philosophy from The University of Michigan. He is the author of two books, Microfoundations and Macroeconomics: An Austrian Perspective (Routledge, 2000) and Monetary Evolution, Free Banking, and Economic Order (Westview, 1992), and he has written extensively on Austrian economics, Hayekian political economy, monetary theory and history, and macroeconomics. In addition to several dozen articles in numerous professional journals, he has also done nationally recognized public policy work on the role of the private sector during Hurricane Katrina for the Mercatus Center, where he is an Affiliated Senior Scholar. The author of numerous op-eds, Horwitz is a frequent guest on TV and radio programs, particularly on the Great Recession and monetary policy. His current research is on the economics and social theory of the family, and he is at work on a book on classical liberalism and the family. Horwitz also serves as the book review editor of Review of Austrian Economics, and co-editor of the book series Advances in Austrian Economics. He is a contributing editor at The Freeman, where he has a weekly column at The Freeman Online, and he blogs at "Coordination Problem" and "Bleeding Heart Libertarians." Horwitz is a past recipient of three fellowship research grants from the Earhart Foundation and has been a visiting scholar at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center at Bowling Green State University. He was awarded the Hayek Prize in 2010 by the Fund for the Study of Spontaneous Order for his work on the economics of the family among other contributions. At St. Lawrence, he has been the recipient of the the Frank P. Piskor Lectureship for 1998-99 and the J. Calvin Keene Award in 2003, and served as Associate Dean of the First Year from 2001 to 2007. A member of the Mont Pelerin Society, Horwitz has spoken to professional, student, policymaker, and general audiences throughout the US, Canada, Europe, and South America.

One of the most common objections to free markets is that they ignore ethical considerations. In particular, **critics argue that there are many things we “ought” to do that they believe will make** people’s **lives better** off. We ought to “redistribute” income to the poor, they say. We ought to make health care a right. We ought to fix the economy by bailing out the financial industry. **The problem with** all **these “oughts” is** that **they eventually confront the principle ought implies can**. Can the desired end (improving the welfare of the poor, for example) be achieved by the chosen means (income “redistribution”)? If not, then what does the “ought” really mean? **“Oughts” without “cans”–**ethical pronouncements without economics–are likely to **lead to disastrous public policies**. In exploring the relationship between economics and ethics, we can start with two definitions that seem relevant here. The economist David Prychitko once defined economics as “the art of putting parameters on our utopias.” And in a particularly insightful definition, Nobel laureate F. A. Hayek wrote that “The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.” What both definitions suggest is that economics deals with the realm of the possible and in doing so demarcates the limits to what should be imaginable. **Before we say we “ought” to do something,** perhaps **we should be sure we can do it**, in the sense that the action is likely to achieve the intended ends. Put differently: ought implies can. **Ethicists can imagine all kinds of schemes to remedy perceived social ills, but none of the aspiring benefactors can afford to ignore** economic **analysis. Being able to dream something doesn’t guarantee it is possible**. Too often ethical pronouncements have an air of hubris about them, as the pronouncer simply assumes we can do what he says we ought to do. By contrast, economics demands some humility. We always have to ask whether it’s humanly possible to do what the ethicists say we ought. **To say we ought to do something we cannot do, in the sense that it won’t achieve our end, is to engage in a pointless exercise. If we cannot do it, to say that we ought to is to command the impossible.**

**There are two warrants for this principle:**

1. **Moral norms cannot require the impossible. To morally require the impossible would mean to demean those who cannot achieve the impossible. For example, you would not morally require an individual who can't swim to save a drowning individual since it would be impossible for them.**
2. **Debating whether something is morally right is pointless if it cannot be achieved. This means that my affirming without being sure it is possible would force the impossible upon the actor, and dooming failure**

**Therefore, unless the affirmative can prove the resolution to be possible, there cannot be a moral obligation to affirm. No matter what my opponent’s framework is, this must come first because if implementation is not possible, there is no way it can be morally required.**

## Contention 1: Objectivity Doesn’t Exist

#### Even deciding what news to report is unobjective. Without subjectivity to allow news companies to decide what is real, true, and important, news outlets will have to report on absolutely every single mundane and trivial event.

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Wijnberg, Rob. “Why objective journalism is a misleading and dangerous illusion.” *The Correspondent*, 7 October 2017, https://thecorrespondent.com/6138/why-objective-journalism-is-a-misleading-and-dangerous-illusion/157316940-eb6c348e. Accessed 1 March 2022.

Marcel Gelauff says he doesn’t want his editorial team to take a position on the news. Let me be the first to say that, alas, it’s a vain hope. Describing the world with no idea of what’s good or bad, relevant or trivial, true or false is literally impossible. Behind every report, every feature, every news item, lies a worldview rooted in assumptions ontological (what’s real?), epistemological (what’s true?), methodological (how do we find out?), and moral (why does it matter?). Or, to put it in Gelauffian terms, all news comes from *a position.* Why doesn’t the evening newscast ever lead with crop circles made by UFOs? Because the editorial department takes the position that UFOs don’t exist. Why doesn’t the news ever lead with a delayed train between St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk? Because the editors take the position that a late Russian train doesn’t matter here. Why does the news never open with the biggest, most powerful Dutch company [*Correspondents Maurits Martijn and Tomas Vanheste have written about Vitol: “Nobody’s ever asked a question in Parliament about this Dutch oil giant” (in Dutch only).*](https://decorrespondent.nl/438/over-deze-nederlandse-oliereus-is-nog-nooit-een-kamervraag-gesteld/96941604870-00bd17df)in the world, the oil and gas trader Vitol? Because the editors take the position that Vitol isn’t doing anything wrong. The reverse is true too: why does the news open with a Trump tweet, a bombing in Syria, a domestic policy proposal, chaos at a national transportation hub? Because the editors take the position that statements by a US president, wars in the Middle East, our own leaders’ plans, and travel snafus in our own country matter. And why does the news always call bombings by ISIS “terrorist attacks” and those by Western governments “bombardments”? Because the editors take the position that that’s what they are. Why does the news always frame the growth of the economy as something positive and not as a disaster for the climate, the environment, or the corals in the ocean? Because the editors take the position that economic growth is good. So when an editor claims not to take a position on the news, he or she is making the most basic misrepresentation possible.

#### Journalists often report on subjective content—this means there’s no way to be objective, especially when some of the content is about things like human rights violations or discrimination. There is a clear right and wrong, and journalists shouldn’t be expected to report both sides.

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Schwartz, Max. “True journalism can't be objective – Massachusetts Daily Collegian.” *Massachusetts Daily Collegian*, 13 April 2021, https://dailycollegian.com/2021/04/true-journalism-cant-be-objective/. Accessed 1 March 2022.

As journalists we begin our careers with different goals, some of us reporting on presidential debates, others on the frontlines of a skirmish with a reporter’s vest and taking photos of it all. What no one signs up for, however, is looking at these events from a press box, reporting on subjective coverage from an objective lens. The fundamental problem with the current state of journalism is the notion that all journalism is objective. Beginning in the 1940s and 50s journalists served more as stenographers for politicians than they did purveyors of the truth. Between Upton Sinclair’s “[The Jungle](https://www.amazon.com/Jungle-Upton-Sinclair/dp/1503331865)” and Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s Watergate coverage, the 20th century proved Americans could trust journalists. This sentiment still mostly stands true, which is why good journalism is an integral aspect of any democratic nation. As more diverse groups of people begin taking positions of power in large corporations, politics and educational institutions we’re beginning to see a shift in how this objective narrative is framed. What was objective 10 years ago is subjective today. Over time we will continue to scrutinize and convey these “objective issues” more ethically and fairly. What makes the label of objectivity so comical is that it’s near impossible to be objective about your coverage. There are few issues journalists report on that can be classified as objective, for instance, the weather is objective and the early details of an armed robbery. What’s not objective is how this weather will affect the readers’ moods and whether the armed robbers had bad childhoods, or the system failed them. While readers expect their favorite publications to be truthful and state the facts, there needs to be policy changes within these publications acknowledging that there are some issues where objectivity goes out the window. When we discuss the morality of abortion, LGBTQ+ rights and race relations in the United States, there is no way to report just the facts because “the facts” are someone’s quality of life and integrity. After Republican Senator Tom Cotton wrote his [opinion piece](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/opinion/tom-cotton-protests-military.html) for the New York Times arguing the government should deploy the military to handle protestors, he had the privilege of returning to his life as usual. He didn’t need to wash his eyes out with milk or worry that breaking the speed limit is a death wish – but some of his readers may have. While there was nothing objective about Senator Cotton’s piece – after all, it was an opinion piece – there was a subset of people who felt their voice was finally being heard and took these opinions as fact. That’s the danger in claiming objectivity; you can’t be objective about human rights.