7. The Dualism of Normativity

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7.1. The Objects of Obligation and Permission

I will be using the term “ought” in the general normative sense, that is, in the sense in which it is true not only that one ought not torture babies, but in which it is also true that one ought to carry an umbrella on a rainy day. And I will say that one is obligated to do something, believe something, etc., just in case one ought to do it, believe it, etc., in this general normative sense.

But in ordinary language, the term “obligation” does not correspond to the general normative use of the term “ought,” but refers rather to legal or moral demands. Nor is it the case, in ordinary language, that one is permitted to do something, believe something, etc., only if it is not the case that one is not obligated to do it, believe it, etc.: although I ought to carry an umbrella at home on a rainy day, it is permissible, in the ordinary sense, for me to fail to do so. And so on the usage I will be adopting, “ought” will have a wider extension than in ordinary usage; and “permissible” will have a much narrower extension than in normal usage. I will say that an action is obligatory, or that one ought to perform this action, whenever there is more reason to act in this way than to act otherwise; and I will say that an action is impermissible whenever there is more reason to act otherwise. Similarly, I will say that an attitude is obligatory whenever there is more reason to have this attitude than not to have it, and I will say than an action is impermissible whenever there is more reason not to have it.

In order to cover all kinds of obligation, including obligations to perform actions and obligations to have beliefs and other attitudes, I will speak, in general, of obligations to have properties. Thus, if an agent ought to believe that \( p \), I will say that she ought to have the property of believing that \( p \), and if an agent ought to \( \phi \), I will say that the agent ought to have the
property of φ-ing. Note that when I say that the agent ought to have property $A$, I do not mean that the agent ought to bring it about that she has property $A$; if I wanted to say that the agent ought to bring it about that she has property $A$, I would say that she ought to have the property of bringing it about that she has property $A$.

One might suppose that the objects of obligations are always acts or attitudes, but this view is mistaken. Consider the following case. Suppose that Bill and Steve are roommates. And suppose that Steve should move out of the apartment if and only if he dislikes Bill. And suppose Bill mistreats animals (e.g., he throws rocks at the squirrels he passes them on his way to work). And suppose, further, that disliking those who mistreat animals is permissible, but not obligatory. In this case, it is not obligatory for Steve to move out of the apartment. For it is not obligatory that Steve dislike those who mistreat animals, and consequently it is not obligatory that he dislike Bill, nor that he move out of the apartment. Nor is it obligatory that Steve not to dislike those who mistreat animals (that is, it is permissible for Steve to dislike such people). For Steve is not obligated to stay in the apartment, and it would be permissible for him to dislike animals and leave the apartment. What is obligatory is that Steve have the property of either leaving the apartment or not disliking those who mistreat animals. But there is no action of either leaving the apartment or not disliking those who mistreat animals (since one of the disjuncts of this disjunction is not an action), nor is there an attitude of either leaving the apartment or not disliking those who mistreat animals (since one of the disjuncts of this disjunction is not an attitude). And so there are objects of obligation that are neither actions nor attitudes.

But not every property is such that its instantiation is the possible object of an obligation. For one thing, it is generally agreed that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, and hence it can only be the case that one ought to have a property if one can have this property. Thus, it cannot be the case that I ought to be immortal, or that I ought not to be self-identical, or that I ought to have naturally curly hair. But the requirement that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ is a consequence of a more general requirement that one can only be obligated to do what is in one’s control. Thus, just as it cannot
the be the case that I ought not to be self-identical, so it cannot be the case that I ought to be self-identical, since being self-identical isn’t up to me, and so it is not susceptible to deontic evaluation. Similarly, it cannot be the case that I ought to be mortal, or that I ought to have naturally straight hair.

If the instantiation of a property by an agent is up to this agent, or under this agent’s control, in the manner that is relevant to the deontic evaluability of the property, we may say that the property is mutable; otherwise, we may say that it is immutable. But what is the relevant sense of being up to an agent? To answer this question, we should first note that deontic categories are at home in the context of reasoning. When we reason practically, we are seeking an action or strategy that is permissible or obligatory, and seeking to avoid actions or strategies that are impermissible. Similarly, when we reason theoretically, we are seeking beliefs that are permissible or obligatory, and seeking to avoid ones that are impermissible. Thus, it seems that the deontically evaluable is that about which it is appropriate to reason. And if the deontically evaluable is whatever is up to us, then it would seem that the deontically evaluable must be that about which it is appropriate to reason.

Now in order for something to be an appropriate object of reasoning, it must depend appropriately on our reasoning. Facts that do not depend on our reasoning at all (e.g., the fact that 17 is a prime number, or the fact of universal gravitation) are not appropriate objects of reasoning, nor are they up to us, and nor are they deontically evaluable. Other facts may depend on our reasoning in the wrong way. Thus, reasoning for too long may give me a headache, and so my having a headache depends on my reasoning, but not in the appropriate way. But I will not try to offer an account of what this right way is. Suffice it to say that our actions, intentions and beliefs depend on our reasoning in a manner that our headaches do not, and hence that these are up to us, and hence mutable and deontically evaluable.

It follows that we must reject the view that whenever something is not obligatory, its
negation of permissible. For something might fail to be obligatory because it, or its negation, is immutable, and in this case its negation will be neither permissible nor impermissible. Thus, since I have no choice but to be self-identical, it is not the case that I ought to be self-identical, but it does not follow that it would be permissible for me not to be self-identical.

One might well object to the view I have proposed that only what mutable, or up to us, is deontically evaluable. For surely our beliefs are deontically evaluable (e.g., one ought not to believe that it is raining and that it is not raining), but one might hold that our beliefs are not up to us. Now there is one sense in which what we believe is not up to us: we cannot, in general, believe something simply because we want to believe it, or because believing it would have good practical consequences. But this does not show that it is not up to us what we believe; what it shows is rather that it is not up to us what we regard as counting in favor of belief. If it is perfectly obvious that some consideration does not count in favor of a belief in the sense that is relevant to belief, then we will be unable to form the belief on the basis of that consideration, however much we might like to. But in this respect, belief is no different from action. If it is perfectly obvious that some consideration does not count in favor of an action in the manner that is relevant to action, then we will be unable to undertake this action on the basis of this consideration, however much we might like to. Suppose it is obvious to me that considerations of honor don’t count in favor of actions. I might believe this, while also believing that it would be to my advantage to choose what are in fact foolish actions for the sake of honor. That is, I might believe that the benefits of choosing inappropriate actions for bad reasons would outweigh the advantages of choosing appropriate actions for good reasons. Even so, I will be unable to choose an action that I regard as obviously foolish.

Note that what can be effectively deliberated about, and hence what lies within an agent’s control, or is up to the agent, can change over time. Suppose, for example, that there is a play that I really want to see in New York at 8pm, and if I want to arrive on time for the play I must take the 6:30 train. Then it may be true at 6pm that I ought to take the 6:30 train. But if 6:45
comes around, and I have not taken the 6:30 train, then it is no longer within my power to take the 6:30 train—indeed, if 6:27 comes around, and I’m still at home, it is no longer in my power to take the 6:30 train. Thus, if at 6:27 it is no longer the case that I can take the 6:30 pm train, it follows that it will no longer be the case that I ought to take the 6:30 train, since ‘ought’ implies ‘can.’ Thus, actions and other properties can go from being normatively evaluable to being immutable and hence not normatively evaluable. And so it can cease to be the case that one ought to do something.

Not only can an action cease to be deontically evaluable, it can also change its normative valance. An action can go from being impermissible to being permissible or obligatory, and it can also go from being permissible or obligatory to being impermissible. Suppose 6:45 comes around, and I haven’t taken the 6:30 train, and so I know I won’t be able to see the whole play, but I can still catch the 7 pm train and see all but the beginning of the play. In this case, it may be that at 6:45 I ought to take the 7 pm train. And yet, at 6pm, taking the 7 pm train was something I was obligated not do, since it conflicts with taking the 6:30 train, which was something I was obligated to do. Thus, taking the 7 pm train goes from being impermissible to being obligatory. Similarly, it might be that at 6pm, I was obligated to stop by the magazine store on my way to the play and pick up a copy of *Ukulele Monthly* to read during the intermission. But it might be that when 6:45 comes along and I haven’t taken the 6:30 train, I am obligated to take the 7 pm train and then go directly from the train station to the theater. And so stopping by the magazine store goes from being obligatory to being impermissible.

The issue of what is immutable and what is up to us will become very important in the next chapter in the discussion of normative reasons.
7.2. The Distinction between Subjective and Objective Obligation

Thelma is extremely thirsty, and would like to drink some water. She is presented with a glass, the contents of which smell distinctly like bleach. And nothing else that is potable is available. Suppose, however, that her olfactory experience is misleading. The glass in fact contains water, but unbeknownst to Thelma, an evil scientist has just tampered with her olfactory system so that water smells to her like bleach. Ought she to drink from the glass?

There are at least three views one might hold about this case. The first is that Thelma ought to drink from the glass, and that there is no sense in which she ought not to drink from the glass. Call this the objective monist view concerning practical obligation. A second possible view is that she ought not to drink from the glass, and that there is no sense in which she ought to drink from the glass. Call this the subjective monist view concerning practical obligation. And a third possible view is that there is a sense in which she ought to drink from the glass, and another sense in which she ought not to drink from the glass. Call this the dualist view concerning practical obligation.

For each of these positions concerning practical obligation, there is a corresponding position concerning epistemic obligation, or obligation to believe. Thus, corresponding to the objective monist view concerning practical obligation, there is an objective monist view according to which Thelma ought to believe that the glass contains water (since this belief is true), and there is no sense in which she ought to believe otherwise. Corresponding to the subjective monist view concerning practical obligation, there is a subjective monist view according to which she ought to believe that the glass contains bleach (since this belief is best supported by the available evidence), and there is no sense in which she ought to believe otherwise. And corresponding to the dualist view concerning practical obligation, there is a dualist monist view concerning belief, according to which there is one sense in which Thelma ought to believe that the glass contains water and another sense in which she ought to believe that the glass contains bleach.
One might hold that some kind of monism must be true. For if dualism were true, then there will be situations in which agents have conflicting obligations: there will be situations in which an agent ought, one sense, to act in some way or have some attitude, and in which one she ought, in the other sense, not to act in this way or have this attitude. But one might hold that this is impossible, and that it cannot be the case that, regardless of what one does or what attitudes one has, there is some sense in which one’s actions or attitudes are impermissible. But one can insist that some kind of monism is true, without holding that either objective monism is true across the board or that subjective monism is true across the board. One might hold instead, for example, that objective monism concerning practical obligation is true, while subjective monism concerning doxastic obligation is true. Thus, in the case described above, in which the liquid in the glass is water that smells to me like bleach, one might hold that Thelma ought, in the only applicable sense, to drink from the glass, and that she ought, in the only applicable sense, to believe that the glass contains bleach. In other words, one might hold that the ‘ought’ that applies to belief is subjective, in the sense that what one ought to believe is determined by one’s evidence or epistemic situation, while the ‘ought’ that applies to action is objective, in the sense that it depends on the way the world really is, not on one’s evidence or epistemic situation.

This mixed view has some prima facie plausibility, but this plausibility diminishes on reflection. If one holds that Thelma ought to believe that the glass contains bleach, then this is presumably because one holds that, given the available evidence, it would be irrational for her to believe otherwise, and that one ought to conform to the requirements of rationality. But surely it would also be irrational for Thelma to drink from the glass while believing that it contain bleach. And so if rationality requires that she believe that the glass contains bleach, then rationality must also require that she not drink from the glass. And so if she ought to conform to the requirements of rationality, then she ought not to drink from the glass. And so the view that there is a sense in which Thelma ought to believe that the glass contains bleach, but that there is no sense in which she ought to drink from the glass, is implausible.
Conversely, the view that there is a sense in which she ought to drink from the glass, but that there is no sense in which she ought not to believe that the glass contains bleach, is also implausible. For if one holds that she ought to drink from the glass, this is presumably because, in spite of the misleading evidence to the contrary, this is the action that would be most objectively fitting or objectively appropriate, and one ought to conform to the requirements of objective appropriateness. But surely, since the belief that the glass contains bleach is \textit{false}, this belief would be objectively unfitting or inappropriate. Beliefs aim at the truth, and so false beliefs are, in some important sense, wrong or inappropriate. Thus, if one ought to conform to the requirements of objective appropriateness, then Thelma ought not to believe that the glass contains bleach.

In the remainder of this section, I will confine myself to discussing practical obligation, and I will argue for the dualist view. But the arguments I will offer can be extended to apply to beliefs and other attitudes.

But first I should say something about the nature of the claims I am arguing for. I am not arguing for the claim that in ordinary English, there is a clear distinction between two senses or two uses of the word “ought.” Questions concerning contingent facts about natural languages are not philosophical questions, nor are they the subject if this dissertation. The aim guiding both this chapter and the next is not the aim of providing an analysis of ordinary language or folk concepts, but rather the aim of constructing a system of concepts wherewith the normative facts can be articulated. The claim I will argue for presently is that a distinction between subjective and objective obligation must be drawn if we are to make sense of the normative facts. Thus, to paraphrase Voltaire, if two senses of ‘ought’ did not exist, it would be necessary to invent them.

Or rather, what is essential is that a distinction be drawn between to parallel concepts; how we label these concepts—whether we call one of them ‘subjective obligation’ and the other ‘objective obligation,’ or employ some other terms, is a matter of secondary importance.
Now for the arguments. One argument for the need for a subjective or evidence-relative ought is very simple:

1. If one is open to criticism for φ-ing, then there is a sense in which one ought not to φ.
2. Thelma would be open to criticism for drinking from the glass (the contents of which smells to her like bleach).

C1. Therefore, there is a sense in which Thelma ought not to drink from the glass.

3. But this cannot be the objective or evidence-nonrelative sense, for in the latter sense (if there is such a sense) it is not the case that Thelma ought not to drink from the glass.

C2. Therefore there must be a subjective or evidence-relative sense of ‘ought’.

In light of this argument, I believe that the objective monist view is untenable. Why, then, might someone hold it? The view may be motivated by the following sort of case.

Thelma’s sister, Thessaly, is also extremely thirsty. She pours water from her kitchen sink into her Brita filter and purifies it. She then places a pH indicator into the water, and it gives a reading of 7. She then pours some of the water into her goldfish bowl, and her goldfish swims around happily. She then gives some of the water to her trusted friend Theresa, who drinks, says it is the purest-tasting water she has ever imbibed, and asks for more. Still, Thessaly believes that the liquid is bleach. And this is a problem, since there is nothing else available to drink. In this case, it is very plausible to say that Thessaly ought to drink water, and that there is no sense, not even a subjective sense, in which she ought not to drink the water. It is true that Thessaly ought to be such that (if she believes that the liquid is bleach, then she does not drink the liquid). But there are two ways in which she can satisfy this requirement: by not drinking the liquid, or by not believing that the liquid is bleach. And in the present case, it is clear that the manner in which she ought to satisfy this requirement is by not believing that the liquid is bleach. And so it is very plausible to hold that it is not the Thessaly’s obligation is univocal.
But a similar analysis will not work for the case of Thelma. For just as one ought be such that (if one believes that the liquid is bleach, then one does not drink it), so one ought to be such that (if the liquid smells to one just like bleach, and there is no contrary evidence to suggest that it is not bleach, then one believes that it is bleach). It follows that one ought to be such that (if the liquid smells to one just like bleach, and there is no contrary evidence to suggest that it is not bleach, then one does not drink it). But there aren’t two ways in which Thelma one could fulfill this requirement. For it isn’t up to Thelma whether the liquid smells to her like bleach, etc. The evidence that is currently available to Thelma is not a fact over which Thelma currently has any control. And so the only way that Thelma can be such that (if the liquid smells to her just like bleach, and there is no contrary evidence to suggest that it is not bleach, then she does not drink it), is by not drinking the liquid. Thus, since Thelma ought (in some sense) to satisfy this conditional, and since the only way she can do so is by not drinking the bleach, it follow that she ought (in some sense) not to drink the bleach.

I have argued that we should recognize a subjective or evidence-relative sense of ‘ought’. I will now argue that we should recognize an objective or evidence non-relative sense of ‘ought’. Consider Theo. Theo, like Thelma, Thessaly, is thirsty, and like Thelma, he is the victim of an evil scientist’s evil scheme. But while the scientist tampered with Thelma’s olfactory nerves so as to make water smell to her like bleach, the scientist tampered with Theo’s olfactory nerves so as to make bleach smell to him like water. Now suppose that Theo is presented with a glass of bleach that smells to him like water, and that there is no available evidence suggesting that the liquid is not water. Now if there is no objective or evidence-independent sense of ‘ought,’ then there is no sense in which Theo ought not to drink from the glass. But there must be such a sense, as can be seen from the following argument:

1. An agent ought (in some sense) not to act in such a way as to do great harm to herself when doing so would have no beneficial consequences.
2. Theo’s drinking from the glass would do great harm to him and would have no beneficial consequences.

C1. Therefore, Theo ought, in some sense, not to drink from the glass.

3. This cannot be the subjective or evidence-relative sense, since in the latter sense it is not the case that Theo ought not to drink from the glass.

C2. Therefore there must be an objective or evidence non-relative sense of ‘ought’.

Personally, I find this argument very compelling. But the subjective monist may consider it question begging. For he will deny the first premise. That is, he will deny that an agent ought, in some sense, not to act in such a way as to do great harm to herself, when doing so would have no beneficial consequences. Rather, he will say that what an agent ought not to do is to act in a way which, given the evidence, appears to be such that it would result in great harm to herself and to have no beneficial consequences. But given the evidence, it does not appear that drinking from the glass would do great harm to Theo, and so, in drinking from the glass, Theo would not be violating the norm that the subjective monist would endorse.

Fortunately, a less question-begging argument can be given against subjective monism, as follows:

1. If, in recommending to an agent that she φ, one would be giving her bad advice, then there must be some sense in it is not the case that the agent ought to φ.

2. In recommending to Theo that he drink from the glass, one would be giving Theo bad advice.

C1. Therefore, there must be some sense in which it is not the case that Theo ought to drink from the glass.

3. But this cannot be the subjective or agent-relative sense, for in the latter sense Theo ought to drink from the glass.
C2. Therefore, there must be an objective or evidence-nonrelative sense of ‘ought’.

One last argument for recognizing an evidence-nonrelative ought: in answering the question “what ought I do?” we often seek new evidence, and rationally so. For example, in determining whom one ought to vote for, one might rationally read up on the candidates, their records and their positions, attend a debate among the candidates, and so on. But if the only question of whom one ought to vote for were the question of whom one ought to vote for in the evidence-relative sense, then there would generally not be any point in gathering new evidence. (Or rather, if there were a point in gathering new evidence, the evidence in question would be meta-evidence: evidence bearing on the question of what counts as evidence, or on the question of how conflicting evidence ought to be weighed. But this is not the sort of evidence we are seeking when read up on the candidates.) Indeed, if, when we ask what we ought to do, our only problem is to determine what we ought to do in the evidence-relative sense, then this question could most easily be answered by ensuring that one acquires no evidence whatever bearing on the alternatives to be chosen among. If, for example, one had absolutely no evidence concerning the alternative candidates one can vote for, then the question of which candidate one ought to vote for in the evidence-relative sense would be very easy to answer: it would be permissible, in this sense, to vote for any one of the candidates. By avoiding the acquisition of any relevant evidence, one can ensure that all one’s options are permissible in the evidence-relative sense, and so one can ensure that in this sense, one never does what one oughtn’t.

Some readers may wonder why I am bothering to argue against a view that is so obviously false as subjective monism, or evidence-relative monism. My reason is that no less a philosopher than John Broome is committed to this view.

Broome considers an example that is structurally analogous to the following example. Suppose Enid is presented with three envelopes, and she is only allowed to take one. She knows that one or other of the first two envelopes contains $1500, while the other is empty. She also
knows that the third envelope contains $1000. But she has no other relevant information. In particular, she has no evidence bearing on which of the first two envelopes contains the $1500 and which is empty. As a matter of fact, the $1500 is in the first envelope. Which envelope ought she to choose? Call this the three envelope problem.

In this case, if there is an objective or evidence-nonrelative sense of ought, Enid ought, in this sense, to choose the first envelope. For it would be better to get $1500 than to get $1000. And if there is a subjective or evidence-relative sense of ought, then she ought, in this sense, to choose the third envelope. For, given her evidence, Enid’s should have a degree of credence of .5 that the $1500 is in the first envelope, and a degree of credence of .5 that it is in the second envelope. And so, for each of the two first envelopes, she should have a degree of credence of .5 that if she takes it she will get $1500, and a degree of credence of .5 that if she takes it she will get nothing. And the certainty of getting $1000 is preferable to a gamble involving a .5 chance of getting $1500 and a .5 chance of getting nothing.

Broome denies that there is any central sense of ‘ought’ in which Enid ought to take the first envelope, and so he denies that there is any central sense of ‘ought’ that is evidence-independent. His argument is as follows. According to Broome, any sense of any central sense of ‘ought’ must be directly practical, in the sense that it must bear directly on action. Thus, one cannot rationally and intentionally do something while believing that one ought not to do it, in any central sense of ‘ought’. And so Enid cannot rationally choose the third envelope while believing that she ought not to do so, in any central sense of ‘ought’.

Now if there is such a sense of ‘ought,’ then Enid ought, in this sense, to choose the envelope containing the $1500. Hence, if there is an objective sense of ought, Enid could rationally believe that she ought, in this sense, either to choose the first envelope or to choose the second envelope; indeed, she could not rationally believe otherwise. Further, Enid could rationally choose the third envelope, and she could not rationally choose otherwise. Hence, if
there is an objective sense of ought, Enid could rationally choose the third envelope while believing that she ought not, in this sense, to choose the third envelope. It follows, according to Broome, that if there is an objective or evidence non-relative sense of ‘ought,’ then it is not a central sense of this term.

Now Broome may be right that any central sense of ‘ought’ must be directly practical, in the sense that it must bear directly on action. But it does not follow that there is no central objective sense of ought. For the objective ‘ought’ does bear directly on action, and so it is practical; it simply bears on action in a manner that differs from the way in which the subjective ‘ought’ bears on action. To see how, let us first define an atomic option as an option that is not equivalent to the disjunction of two or more relevantly different options. Thus, where there are three envelopes to choose from, and one cannot take more than one of them, not taking the third envelope is not an atomic option, since it is identical with the disjunction of taking the first envelope, taking the second envelope and not taking any envelope; and these are relevantly different options, since they could result in one’s getting different amounts of money. But taking the third envelope may well be an atomic option. Admittedly, there are different ways in which this option could be realized; e.g., one could take the envelope with one’s left hand or with one’s right hand, but these may well not be relevantly different options, since one may know that nothing of importance hangs on which hand one takes the envelope with.

It is a requirement of rationality that if one believes that the option of φ-ing is atomic and that one ought objectively to φ, then one φs, or at least one intends to φ. Thus, believing that the option of φ-ing is atomic and that one ought objectively to φ rationally requires one to intend to φ, quite apart from any beliefs one might have concerning the subjective rationality of φ-ing. Thus, the objective ‘ought’ can bear directly on action, and can thus be directly practical. Therefore, the argument according to which there can be no central sense of ought that is objective, since any objective sense of ought would not be directly practical, rests on a false premise.
Indeed, there is a way in which the objective ‘ought’ is more directly practical than the subjective ‘ought.’ For believing with certainty that φ-ing is an atomic option and that one ought objectively to φ rationally requires one to intend to φ. But believing that φ-ing is an atomic option and that one ought subjectively to φ does not rationally require one to intend to φ. For one might believe that one lacks sufficient information to make up one’s mind, and so one might decide to acquire more evidence before forming any intentions concerning whether to φ.

7.3. Reductive Accounts of Subjective Obligation: Initial Problems

Let us assume, therefore, that there is an objective as well as a subjective sense of ‘ought’. When an agent ought, in the objective sense, to φ, let us say that it is objectively obligatory for her to φ, and when an agent ought, in the subjective sense, to φ, let us say that it is subjectively obligatory for her to φ. Similarly, when it is up to an agent whether she φ-s, and when it is not the case that she is objectively obligated not to φ, we may say it is objectively permissible for her to φ. And when it is up to an agent whether she φ-s, and it is not the case that she is subjectively obligated not to φ, we may say that it is subjectively permissible for her to φ. What I am calling ‘subjectively obligatory’ could equally be called ‘rationally obligatory,’ and what I am calling ‘subjectively permissible’ could equally be called ‘rationally permissible’; I will be using these expressions synonymously. I will not, however, be using the expression ‘rationally required’ as a synonym for ‘rationally obligatory’ or ‘subjectively obligatory.’ Rather, I will show, in the next chapter, that a distinction must be drawn between what is subjectively or rationally obligatory and what is subjectively or rationally required.

How, then, are subjective and objective obligation related to one another? One approach, which we may call reductive objectivism, attempts to explain subjective obligation in terms of objective obligation. According to this view, what makes it the case that one ought subjectively to φ is that if the world were aligned with one’s beliefs (i.e., if the world were such that the truth
conditions for one’s beliefs were all satisfied), then one would be objectively obligated to \( \phi \). More generally, according to this view, for any property, \( A \), what makes it the case that one is subjectively obligated to be \( A \) is that if the world were aligned with one’s beliefs, one would be objectively obligated to be \( A \). An alternative approach, which we may call *reductive subjectivism*, attempts to explain objective obligation in terms of subjective obligation. According to this view, what makes it the case that one is objectively obligated to be \( A \) is that if one’s beliefs were aligned with the world (i.e., if one were fully informed), then one would be subjectively obligated to be \( A \).

Both reductive objectivism and reductive subjectivism agree that for a fully informed agent, the properties (actions, attitudes, etc.) that she is subjectively obligated to have coincide with the properties she is objectively obligated to have. Both agree, for example, that if Fulbright is fully informed, then it would be objectively obligatory for her to drink from the glass if and only if it would be subjectively obligatory for her to drink from the glass. What they disagree about is the order of explanation. The reductive objectivist holds that Fulbright is subjectively obligated to drink from the glass *because* her beliefs are such that, if they were true (which they are) she would be objectively obligated to drink from the glass. By contrast, the reductive subjectivist holds that Fulbright is objectively obligated to drink from the glass *because* the world is such that, if she believed it to be so (which she does), it would be subjectively obligatory for her to drink from the glass.

From the reductive objectivist thesis, in conjunction with a particular objective normative theory (e.g., of objective practical reason), one can derive a subjective normative theory (e.g., a theory of practical rationality or of subjective practical reason). For if one has a conception of what one would be objectively obligated to do under various circumstances, and if assumes that one is subjectively obligated to do whatever one would be objectively obligated to do if the world aligned with one’s beliefs, then on this basis one can infer what one’s subjective or rational obligations are. Conversely, from the reductive *subjectivist* thesis, in conjunction with a
particular subjective normative theory or theory of rationality, one can derive an objective normative theory. For if one has a conception of what one would be subjectively rational under various circumstances, and if assumes that one is objectively obligated to do whatever one would be rationally obligated to do if one were fully informed, then on this basis one can infer what one’s objective obligations are. And so, for example, a desire-based theory of subjective rationality, in conjunction with the reductive subjectivist thesis, entails a desire-based theory of objective reason, of the kind we considered in chapter four.

In general, anyone who accepts the reductive subjectivist thesis will have to accept some sort of subjectivist theory of value or of objective practical reason, though the details of this theory may vary, depending on what theory of subjective rationality one accepts. And I have shown, in chapter 4, that there is reason to subjective theories of value and of objective practical reason. It follows that there is reason to reject the reductive subjectivist thesis.

Thus, in the present chapter, I will focus on the reductive objectivist position. I will argue that this position faces a number of difficulties.

7.3.1. The Problem of Incomplete Beliefs

Suppose Thoughtless Thorsby is thirsty, and he is presented with a glass of liquid that smells distinctly like bleach. He never thinks before he acts, and so, before forming any belief whatever concerning the contents of the glass, he drinks it. Suppose that on many past occasions, such impulsive imbibing of liquids that smell like bleach has resulted in his spending weeks in the hospital, but this fact has not changed Thorsby’s thoughtless ways, nor has it led to his forming any general beliefs concerning liquids that smell like bleach.

The reductive objectivist hold that what would make it the case that it is irrational for Thorsby to drink from the glass is that his beliefs are such that, if they were true, he would be
objectively obligated not to drink from the glass. But since he has no beliefs concerning the contents of the glass, nor any general beliefs from which it follows what the glass contains, he has no beliefs such that, if they were true, he would be objectively obligated not to drink from the glass. And so the reductive objectivist position implies that it would not be irrational for him to drink from the glass, or in other words, that he is not subjectively obligated not to drink from the glass. And this is clearly false: his drinking from the glass, in addition to being thoughtless, is clearly irrational.

7.3.2. The Problem of Irrational Beliefs

Wishful Wilbert thinks before he drinks. Indeed, he thinks before doing anything. But he thinks wishfully. Whenever he feels like acting in some way, he forms the belief that his doing so would immediately result in eternal bliss for every sentient being in the universe. Thus, when he feels like smoking a cigarette, or putting off a painful operation, or staying up all night watching Marx Brothers movies, he does so in the belief that he is thereby precipitating a beneficent apocalypse. Of course, each time he forms a belief of this kind, it turns out to be false. But this does not prevent him from forming another such belief the next time he feels like doing something. And on one particular occasion, he is presented with a glass the contents of which smells distinctly like bleach, and he feels like drinking from the glass. He thus forms the belief that doing so would immediately result in eternal bliss for all sentient beings. Now if his beliefs were true, then he would be objectively obligated to drink from the glass. And so according to the reductive objectivist position, this is what he ought subjectively, or rationally, to do. But this seems clearly false.

One might object as follows:

Though Wilbert is irrational, it is his beliefs, not his actions, that are irrational. Thus, his irrationality is theoretical, not practical. It is irrational for him to believe that his drinking from
the glass would result in eternal bliss for all sentient beings, but given that has this irrational belief, he rationally ought to drink from the glass.

One problem with this position is that it makes practical rationality too easy. It implies that everyone can guarantee that all his actions are rational by following Wilbert’s example and thinking wishfully. Or, to be more precise, anyone who is able to form beliefs as wishfully as Wilbert can ensure that all his actions are rational. More generally, the view proposed in the objection implies that attitudes that one ought rationally not to have (namely irrational beliefs) can be sources of justification, and this implication is implausible.

Further, in order for an action to be rational, it must be possible, in principle, to decide to perform this actions as a result of a rational process of practical deliberation. But practical deliberation involves not only intention formation, but also belief formation. For example, if I want an entertaining evening and I am trying to figure out how to have one, then much of my deliberation will involve the formation of beliefs concerning what would constitute an entertaining evening. Any process of deliberation that involves forming such beliefs irrationally is an irrational process of deliberation, and any action that could result only from an irrational process of deliberation is itself irrational. Suppose, for example, that I want an entertaining evening, and I encounter an add seeking volunteers to participate in an experiment at the Center for Studying the Effects of Prolonged Boredom. I might decide to participate in this study as a result of a process of deliberation in which I form the belief that participating in this experiment would constitute an enjoyable evening. But since no such process of deliberation could be rational, neither could my decision to participate in the study. Similarly, as there is no rational process of deliberation whereby Wilbert could decide to drink from the glass, the contents of which smell like bleach, his drinking from this glass would be irrational. In deciding whether to drink from the glass, he might engage in a process of deliberation wherein he forms the belief that the glass contains water, and consequently decides to drink from the glass. But any such process of deliberation would be irrational.
I believe the position proposed in the objection rests on a confusion between wide scope and narrow scope obligations. Since Wilbert is thirsty, and no other beverage is available, it is true that Wilbert rationally or subjectively ought to be such that (if he believes that the glass contains water, then he drinks from the glass). It does not follow that if he believes that the glass contains water, he ought subjectively to drink from the glass. For there are two possible ways to satisfy this wide scope obligation, and the only rational way to satisfy it is not to believe that the glass contains water.

7.3.3. The Problem of Inconsistent Beliefs

Inconsistent beliefs constitute one class of irrational beliefs that give rise to particularly serious difficulties for the reductive objectivist view we are considering.

Inconsistent Irma has just begun taking a geometry course. She has learned all the axioms of Euclidean geometry, which she believes to be true, and she has also learned how to bisect an angle using only a compass and a straight edge. She infers that it must also be possible to trisect an angle using only a compass and a straight edge. Since the axioms of Euclidean geometry entail that this is impossible, her beliefs are inconsistent. Thus, it is logically impossible for all her beliefs to be true.

Now she is presented with a glass containing a liquid that smells like bleach. Ought she to drink form the glass? According to the position under consideration, she ought to drink from the glass if and only if, were all her beliefs true, she would be objectively obligated to drink it.

Is the counterfactual conditional “if all Irma’s beliefs were true, she would be objectively obligated to drink from the glass” true? On the dominant view of counterfactual conditionals, the truth value of a conditional of the form “if \( p \) then \( q \)” is evaluated by considering the nearest possible world in which \( p \) is true: if, in this world, \( q \) is true, then the conditional is true, and if, in
this world, \( q \) is false, then the conditional is false. But there is no possible world in which all of Irma’s beliefs are true. And so, on the standard view, the truth value of the proposition “if all Irma’s beliefs were true, she would be objectively obligated to drink from the glass” is undefined. Thus, assuming the standard view of counterfactuals, it follows from the reductive objectivist position that there is no fact of the matter concerning whether Irma ought subjectively to drink from the glass. But surely this is wrong: for surely Irma ought subjectively not to drink from the glass. (She ought also to revise her geometrical beliefs).

The reason that this third problem is more serious than the second is that we are all in the position of inconsistent Irma. For all of us, or at least most of us, have inconsistent beliefs. And so the reductionist view under consideration, in conjunction with the standard account of counterfactuals, will entail that there is never any fact of the matter concerning what any of us ought subjectively to do in any situation.

In order to avoid this problem, one prominent objectivist, namely Derek Parfit, has attempted to provide an account of subjective rationality in terms of what we would be objectively obligated to do if the beliefs on which we act were true, rather than if all our beliefs were true. For although all of us have inconsistent beliefs, the beliefs on the basis of which any given action is performed are not generally inconsistent. And so Parfit’s view avoids the implication that there is never a fact of the matter concerning what it would be rational for us to do. In Parfit’s view, an act of ours would be rational just in case “we act in this way because we have certain beliefs, and what we believe would, if true, give us sufficient reasons to act in this way.”

But this cannot be right. For suppose an anvil has been dropped from a tall building and is plummeting toward Enid. Suppose Enid looks up, sees the anvil, and believes that the anvil is plummeting toward her. She has two options: she can remain where she is standing, or she can step out of the way. Suppose she steps out of the way. But suppose it is not the case that she
does this *because* she believes the anvil is plummeting toward her. She simply steps out of the way for no reason at all, and the belief that the anvil is plummeting toward her plays no motivating role. And so it is not the case that Enid steps out of the way because she has certain beliefs, the truth of which would give her sufficient reason to do so. Thus, on Parfit’s view, Enid’s act of stepping out of the way is not rational or rationally permissible. But if stepping out of the way is not rationally permissible, then not stepping out of the way must be rationally obligatory. And this is clearly wrong.

One might object that I am being unfair to Parfit’s positions. What is impermissible for Enid to do is to *step out of the way for no reason at all*. But there is more than one alternative to stepping out of the way for no reason at all: one alternative is for Enid to *remain where she is standing for no reason at all*, a second alternative is for Enid to *remain where she is standing because she believes that a anvil is plummeting toward her*, and a third alternative is for her to *step out of the way because she believes that a anvil is plummeting toward her*. Perhaps it is this third alternative that is rationally obligatory.

This suggestion may seem to solve the problem, but it doesn’t. For on this suggestion, the acts among which Enid must choose are not the overt behaviors of stepping out of the way or remaining where she is standing, but rather combinations of behaviors and beliefs on the basis of which these behaviors are carried out. Parfit’s view is that an act is rational just when it done on the basis of beliefs whose truth would constitute sufficient reasons for doing it. But while behaviors can be done on the basis of beliefs, combinations of behaviors and beliefs on the basis of which they are carried out cannot themselves be done on the basis of reasons. And so if acts are belief-behavior combinations, and if an act is only rationally permissible only if it is done on the basis of a certain kind of belief, then an act is never rationally permissible.

Thus, regardless of whether “acts” are understood as behaviors carried out or as belief-behavior combinations, the view that an act is only rationally permissible if performed for the
right kind of reason, or on the basis of appropriate beliefs, is false. There may be some neighboring view which is true. Suppose we use the term “act” to refer to that which one does, and “action” to refer to the act one does in conjunction with the beliefs on the basis of which one does this act. In this case, it may be true that an action is only rationally permissible if its constituent beliefs are sufficient reasons for its constituent act. Still, we will want a criterion for the rational permissibility of acts. And, for reasons already given, this criterion cannot appeal to the beliefs for which the act is done.

Indeed, if we find a criterion for the rational permissibility of acts, it likely that we will thereby have found a criterion for the rational permissibility of actions. For it is plausible that an action is rationally permissible just in case the act it is done for some reason that suffices to make the constituent act rationally permissible. If this is right, then if we take care of our acts, our actions will take care of themselves.

The three problems I have just pointed out can all be solved by moving from the following view:

(O1) It is obligatory, in the subjective or evidence-relative sense, for an agent, s, to be A just in case, if s’s beliefs were all true, then it would be objectively obligatory for s to be A.

to the following, amended view:

(O2) It is obligatory, in the subjective or evidence-relative sense, for an agent, s, to be A just in case, if the beliefs that s ought to have, in the subjective or evidence-relative sense, were all true, then it would be objectively obligatory for s to be A.

This revised view makes the rationality of an action depend not on the beliefs the agent actually has, but rather on the beliefs the agent ought to have, in the subjective or evidence-relative sense. Thus it avoids the problem of incomplete beliefs. Although thoughtless Thorsby may have no belief concerning the contents of the glass, he ought, in the subjective or evidence-relative sense,
to believe that the glass contains bleach, and if this belief that he ought to have were true, it would be objectively obligatory that he not drink from the glass. Moving to (O2) also solves the problem of irrational beliefs. Although Wishful Wilbert believes that his drinking from the glass would result in eternal bliss for all sentient beings, he ought, in the evidence-relative sense, to believe that his drinking from the glass would result in prolonged, though not eternal, suffering for him, and if this belief that he ought to have were true, he would be objectively obligated not to drink from the glass. And (O2) also solves the problem of inconsistent beliefs. Although Irma’s inconsistent beliefs are irrational, and so she ought not, in the subjective sense, to have them. The beliefs that she ought, subjectively, to have are consistent, and so if what she ought rationally to do is understood not in terms of her actual beliefs but in terms of the beliefs she ought rationally to have, we will avoid the result that there is no fact of the matter concerning what she ought rationally to do.

But this revised view may not satisfy the reductive objectivist. For it does not succeed in reducing subjective obligation to objective obligation. Rather, it is meant as a general account of how the subjective obligations can be understood in terms of objective obligations in conjunction with subjective epistemic obligations. Thus, it provides an account of what one ought subjectively to do in terms of what one ought objectively to do and what one ought subjectively to believe.

Note that if the revised view were stated in terms of objective epistemic obligation rather than subjective epistemic obligation, it would be false. In other words, the following is false:

(O3) It is obligatory, in the subjective or evidence-relative sense, for an agent, s, to be A just in case, if the beliefs that s ought to have, in the objective or evidence-nonrelative sense, were all true, then it would be objectively obligatory for s to be A.

For as I argued in section 8.2, what one ought objectively to believe is the truth. But it is always trivially the case, in the actual world, that the true beliefs are all true. So (O3) is equivalent to
the following:

(O4) It is obligatory, in the subjective or evidence-relative sense, for an agent, s, to be A just in case, in the actual world, it is objectively obligatory for s to be A.

Now (O4), and hence also (O3), implies that an action of attitude is subjectively obligatory just in case it is objectively obligatory. And this is false: when thirsty Thelma’s olfactory nerves are tampered with so that water smells to her like bleach, drinking from the glass is objectively obligatory and refraining from drinking from the glass is subjectively obligatory.

To sum up, we can solve the first three problems I have pointed out with the reductive objectivist position by moving from (O1) to (O2), but the resulting position is not really a form of reductive objectivism, since it accounts for subjective obligation in general not purely in terms of objective obligation, but rather in terms of objective obligation in conjunction with subjective epistemic obligation.

If the account were to succeed in this less ambitious reduction, then perhaps it would be satisfactory. But it does not succeed in this. For there are some additional problems that are shared by both (O1) and (O2).

7.4. Reductive Accounts of Subjective Obligation: Deeper Problems

7.4.1. The Problem of Intermediate Degrees of Belief

Suppose the doxastic attitudes we can have toward propositions did not admit of degrees. Suppose, for example, that for any proposition, the only attitudes we could have toward it were those of believing it, disbelieving it, and suspending judgment. Then it would be clear what we mean when we ask what an agent would be obligated to do if all her beliefs were true (or if all
the beliefs that she ought subjectively to have were true). We can do this by asking whether she is obligated to act in this way in the nearest possible world in which all attitudes toward which she has (or ought to have) an attitude of belief are true, and all the propositions toward which she has an attitude of disbelief are false.

But this view is too simple. When two people both believe a proposition, one of them may believe it with a greater degree of confidence than the other. And if two people disbelieve a proposition, the one may disbelieve it with a greater degree of confidence than the other, or in other words the first may have a greater degree of confidence in its negation than the second. Similarly, when two people suspend judgment in a proposition, one may have more confidence in its truth than the other. The first may be willing to bet dollars for dog biscuits that it is true, while the may only be willing to bet dog biscuits for dollars that it is true. To do justice to these differences, we must recognize degrees of belief.

But if we allow for intermediate degrees of belief, that is to say, for degrees of belief that are intermediate between full belief and full disbelief, then how are we to interpret the claim that what an agent is subjectively obligated to do is whatever she would be objectively obligated to do if all her beliefs were true? For although an attitude of full belief can be true (a full belief is true just in case the proposition fully believed is true), an attitude of partial belief cannot be. If Bill has a degree of belief of \(0.6\) in the proposition that the file contains the receipt for the AC unit, then it makes no sense to ask what he would be objectively obligated to do in a world in which this degree of belief were true.

One response is to say that when we neither believe nor disbelieve a proposition, any doxastic attitude we may have toward this proposition plays no role in determining what it would be rational to do. But this is extremely implausible. If my degree of belief that my revolver is loaded is (or ought to be) \(5/6\), my attitude toward the proposition that the revolver is loaded may fall short of being a full belief that it loaded. But the fact that I have, or ought to have, this
degree of belief is far from irrelevant to the question of how I should act.

A second response is to say that what is subjectively rational to do is whatever would be objectively permissible if all of the propositions in which one has a degree of belief above a certain threshold were true. For wherever one sets the threshold, it will be easy to construct counterexamples. For sometimes we ought rationally to act in ways such that we would be objectively obligated to act in these ways so long as certain propositions in which we have very low degrees of credence were true. Thus, even if I have a very low (but non-zero) degree of credence in the proposition that the revolver is loaded, I will generally be rationally required not to point it at my head and pull the trigger.

A third response is to say that we don’t need a special category of degrees of belief. We can do instead with probabilistic beliefs, that is, with beliefs of the form “the probability that $p$ is true is $x$.” These beliefs can be straightforwardly true or false: the proposition that (the probability that $p$ is true is $x$) is true just in case the probability that $p$ is true is $x$. Suppose we can identify having a degree of belief of $1/3$ in the proposition that the revolver is loaded with believing that the probability that the revolver is loaded is $1/3$. In this case, it makes sense to ask what one would be objectively obligated to do if one’s beliefs were true. A world in which one’s beliefs were true would be a world in which the objective probability that the revolver is loaded is $1/3$. And in such a world, pointing the revolver at one’s head and firing it would not be a good thing to do, since in such a world there will be an objective chance of $1/3$ that doing so would result in one’s death. And so the view under consideration gives the desired result that if one has a degree of belief of $1/3$ in the proposition that the revolver is loaded, it would be irrational to point it at one’s head and fire it.

This view, however, is false. We cannot identify having a degree of belief of $x$ in $p$ with believing that the probability of $p$ is $x$. To see why not, consider the following case. Suppose three scientists, Albert, Werner and Erwin, are observing a radium atom. All three have a degree
of credence of .5 in the proposition that atom is of isotope 227, and a degree of credence of .5 in the proposition that it is of isotope 228. However, the three scientists have different theories of atomic physics. Albert believes that if it is radium 227, it is sure to decay (the objective probability that it will decay is 1) while if it radium 228, it is sure not to decay (the objective probability that it will decay is 0). Werner believes that if it is radium 227, the objective probability that it will decay is .75, while if it is radium 228, the objective probability that it will decay is .25. And Erwin believes that the probability that it will decay is .5 regardless of whether it is radium 227 or 228. Each of the three scientists has a degree of belief of .5 in the proposition that the atom will decay, but they disagree in their attitudes towards propositions concerning the objective probability that the atom will decay. While Erwin believes that the objective probability that the atom will decay is .5, Albert and Werner believe that the objective probability that it will decay is not .5; indeed, they are certain that it is not .5.

Thus, having a degree of belief of x in proposition p cannot be identified with believing that the objective probability of p is x. Nor can it be identified with believing that the subjective probability of p is x. For one thing, this identification would be viciously circular, since the subjective probability of a proposition for an agent just is this agent’s degree of belief in this proposition. For another thing, having a degree of belief in a proposition is a first-order attitude: it is an attitude toward the proposition. But believing that the proposition has a given subjective probability is a second order attitude: it is a belief concerning one’s attitude toward the proposition. And one can believe a proposition to a certain degree without having any second order attitude concerning one’s attitude toward this proposition. Or one can have a false belief concerning one’s attitude toward the proposition. Or one can be uncertain about one’s attitude toward the proposition. In any of these cases, one’s degree of belief in the proposition will not correspond to the subjective probability that one believes it to have.

There is a third kind of probability that one might try. One might suggest that having a degree of belief of x in p is believing that the epistemic probability of p is x, where the epistemic
probability of a proposition is the degree of belief that one ought rationally to have in this proposition. But this view, too, is false. Once again, one can have a degree of belief in a proposition without having any belief concerning what one’s degree of belief in the proposition ought rationally to be. Or one can be uncertain concerning what one’s degree of belief in the proposition ought to be. Or, if doxastic akrasia is possible, then one can have a degree of belief in a proposition while believing that one ought to have some other degree of belief in the proposition. I might, for example, believe that my brother is innocent, while believing that, given the evidence, I ought to believe that he is guilty. Though this would be irrational, it is not psychologically impossible.

I conclude, therefore, that having a degree of belief in a proposition cannot be identified with fully believing some proposition concerning the probability of the proposition. Partial belief is not reducible to full belief. And since an attitude of partial belief cannot be true or false, and since what one rationally or subjectively ought to do can depend upon the degrees of partial belief that one has (or ought to have), it follows that we cannot identify the subjectively obligatory as whatever would be objectively obligatory if one’s beliefs were true.

7.4.2. The Three Envelope Problem

There is a further problem that intermediate degrees of belief can raise: when an agent has intermediate degrees of belief, it can be subjectively obligatory for her to act in ways which, if her beliefs were true, would objectively impermissible. And it can likewise be subjectively impermissible for her to act in ways which, if her beliefs were true, would be objectively obligatory. The three envelope case, discussed in the previous section, is a case in point. Recall that Enid is presented with three envelopes, and she is allowed to take only one. She knows that one or other of the first two envelopes contains $1500, while the other is empty, and she has a degree of belief of .5 in each of the two possibilities. She also knows that the third envelope
contains $1000. But she has no other relevant information. In this case, taking the third envelope is subjectively obligatory, and yet if her beliefs were all true, then it would be objectively impermissible, since it would follow from the truth of her beliefs that either the first envelope contains the most money, and so taking the first envelope is objectively obligatory, or else the second envelope contains the most money, and so taking the second envelope is objectively obligatory. Similarly, not taking the third envelope is subjectively impermissible, but if her beliefs were true, it would objectively obligatory.

Thus, the view that we are subjectively or rationally obligated to do whatever we would be objectively obligated to do if our beliefs were true is untenable. Equally untenable is the view that what we are subjectively or rationally obligated to do whatever we would be objectively obligated to do if the beliefs we ought rationally to have were true. For in the three envelope case just described, Enid’s actual beliefs coincide with the beliefs she ought rationally to have.

7.4.3. The Problem of Akrasia

Let us say that an agent, s, is *akratic* just in case there is some property, A, such that

i. s is A;

ii. whether s is A is under her s’s control; and

iii. s believes that it is subjectively impermissible for s to be A.

Note that akrasia is defined as having a property that one believes one is *subjectively* obligated not to have. For there is nothing irrational about having a property that one believes one is *objectively* obligated not to have. Thus, in the three envelope case, Enid could rationally take the third envelope, while believing that she is objectively obligated to do otherwise.

Akrasia, as I have defined it, is irrational, or subjectively impermissible. Thus, it is never
rational to $\phi$ while believing that it is irrational to $\phi$. Nor is it ever rational to believe that $p$ while believing that it is irrational to believe that $p$. Thus, any adequate account of rationality or subjective permissibility must have the implication that akasria is always subjectively impermissible. But neither (O1) nor (O2) has this implication.

Let us begin with (O1), that is, with the belief-based theory of rationality. Suppose thirsty Thelma is presented with a glass which contains water but appears to contain bleach, and suppose that no other beverage is available. And suppose that Thelma believes, correctly, that it would be subjectively impermissible for her to drink from this glass. Suppose, however, that she has no beliefs whatsoever concerning the contents of the glass, nor any other beliefs that bear on the question of whether she should drink from the glass. In particular, she neither believes that the glass contains water nor does she believe that it contains bleach. Assume, further, that Thelma has no false beliefs.

Now according to (O1), Thelma ought rationally to drink from the glass just in case, in the nearest possible world in which all her beliefs are true, she ought objectively to drink from the glass. But, ex hypothesi, the actual world is a world in which all of Thelma’s beliefs are true, and so it is clearly the nearest possible world in which all her beliefs are true. And since, in the actual world, the glass contains water, which is the only available beverage, Thelma ought objectively to drink from the glass in the actual world. Therefore, (O1) has the false implication that Thelma ought subjectively to drink from the glass. Moreover, in the nearest possible world in which all her beliefs are true, namely the actual world, it is true that she ought rationally not to drink from the glass. And since one ought objectively to believe whatever is true, it follows that in the nearest possible world in which Thelma’s beliefs are all true, she ought objectively to believe that she ought subjectively not to drink from the glass. Thus, in the nearest possible world in which all Thelma’s beliefs are true, she ought objectively to have the property of (drinking from the glass while believing that she ought subjectively not to drink from the glass). And so (O1) has the implication that Thelma ought subjectively to have this property. Therefore,
(O1) has the false implication that Thelma ought subjectively to be akratic.

Let us now consider (O2), that is, the view that one is subjectively obligated to be $A$ just in case, if all the beliefs that one ought rationally to have were true, one would be objectively obligated to be $A$. Let’s return to the case in which Enid must choose between three envelopes, such the third envelope contains $1000, and of the remaining envelopes, she knows that one contains $1500 and the other is empty. Assume that although Enid has incomplete information (she doesn’t know which of the first two envelopes contains the $1500), she has no misinformation or misleading evidence. It follows that everything she ought rationally or subjectively to believe is true, and so the actual world is a world in which all the beliefs she ought subjectively to have are true.

Define property $L$ as the property of believing that one ought subjectively to take the third envelope, and yet not taking the third envelope. In the actual world, it is true that Enid ought subjectively to take the third envelope. Therefore, in the actual world, Enid ought objectively to believe that she ought subjectively to take the third envelope. Further, in the actual world, Enid ought objectively not to take the third envelope. Thus, in the actual world, Enid ought objectively to believe that she ought subjectively to take the third envelope, and yet not do so. In other words, in the actual world, Enid ought objectively to have property $L$.

But since the actual world is a world in which all the beliefs Enid ought subjectively to have are true, it follows that if all the beliefs Enid ought subjectively to have were true, then Enid would be objectively obligated to have property $L$. Therefore, (O2) implies that Enid ought subjectively or rationally to have property $L$. In other words, (O2) implies that Enid ought rationally to be akratic. Thus, (O2), like (O1), is false.
7.4.4 The Problem of Over-Demandingness

A final problem with (O1) and (O2) is that they are both overly demanding. To see why, we need an example of a normative proposition that might plausibly be true, but such that, plausibly, it would be rationally permissible for someone who is descriptively well informed to believe that this proposition is false. The following may be such an example:

\[ p : \text{If one is in a choice situation in which one can either save chimpanzees from extinction and allow dolphins to go extinct, or save dolphins from extinction and allow chimpanzees to go extinct, then, other things being equal, one ought objectively to save chimpanzees from extinction.} \]

Personally, I don’t know whether this proposition is true or false, but it seems like the sort of normative proposition that might be true, and that one might plausibly believe to be false, even if one were well-informed about the descriptive characteristics of the two species.

Let us suppose that Daphne is able to rescue either dolphins or chimpanzees from extinction, but not both. And suppose she has no false beliefs, and that she is fully informed concerning all the descriptive matters of fact that are relevant to her decision, including the descriptive features of the two species. Suppose that she knows that other things are equal, in the sense that the only normatively relevant factor that hinges on her choice is the survival of the two species in question. Suppose, further, that Daphne belongs to a community in which everyone, including the wise, agrees that Daphne ought objectively to save the dolphins. However, Daphne is torn. She finds herself unable to form any opinion concerning which of her options she ought objectively to choose. She is not persuaded by any argument to the effect that one option would be better than the other, nor by any arguments to the effect that her options would be equally good, nor by any arguments to the effect that her options are incommensurable. Thus, she suspends judgment concerning which of the two options she ought objectively to choose. Let us assume that all of Daphne’s normative beliefs are true, but that her normative
beliefs are incomplete, and so these beliefs have no implications concerning which of her options she ought objectively to choose.

However, Daphne must act, and she doesn’t want her inability to form an opinion concerning her objective obligations to prevent her from saving either species, and so she plumps for the dolphins. This, it seems, is something she could do without irrationality.

But (O1) and (O2) imply otherwise. First consider (O1). This view implies that saving the dolphins is subjectively impermissible so long as doing so would be objectively impermissible in a world in which all of Daphne’s beliefs were true. But ex hypothesi, all of Daphne’s beliefs are true. And ex hypothesi, in the actual world, p is true, and so she ought objectively to save the chimpanzees, to save the dolphins instead would be objectively impermissible. Thus, if Daphne’s beliefs were true, which they are, it would be objectively impermissible for her to save the dolphins. Thus, it follows from (O1) that it is subjectively impermissible for her to save the dolphins, or in other words, that in choosing to save the dolphins, she is acting irrationally.

To make (O1) less demanding, we might try revising it as follows. Rather than stating:

(O1)  It is subjectively obligatory for an agent, s, to be A just in case, if s’s beliefs were all true, then it would be objectively obligatory for s to be A.

We might try:

(O1’)  It is subjectively obligatory for an agent, s, to be A just in case, in every possible world in which s’s beliefs are all true, it would be objectively obligatory for s to be A.

This revision does help to make the view less demanding, but it does not solve the Daphne problem. For we are assuming that Daphne is fully informed concerning all the descriptive matters of fact that are relevant to the question of whether she should save chimpanzees or dolphins. Thus, in every possible world in which all her beliefs are true, all the descriptive matters of fact that are relevant to this question are the same. Therefore, assuming that the
normative supervenes on the descriptive, it follows that since saving the dolphins is impermissible in the actual world, it is impermissible in any world in which all of Daphne’s beliefs are true. And so it follows from (O1’) that it is subjectively impermissible for Daphne to save the dolphins.

Now consider (O2). This view implies that saving the dolphins is subjectively impermissible so long as doing so would be objectively impermissible in a world in which all the beliefs that Daphne ought subjectively to have are true. Now we may assume that Daphne has precisely the beliefs that she ought, subjectively, to have. Though she does not have every true belief (in particular, she does not believe \( p \), but rather suspends judgment concerning \( p \)), there is no belief that she is rationally obligated to have, given her evidence, that she fails to have. (Recall that we are assuming that it is subjectively permissible for her not to believe \( p \).) Since we are assuming that she believes everything she ought to believe, and that everything she believes it true, it follows that everything she ought to believe is true. And so the actual world is a world in which everything she ought to believe is true. And in the actual world, it is objectively impermissible for her to save the dolphins. And so it follows from (O2) that it is subjectively impermissible for her to save the dolphins.

Nor does it help to modify (O2) in a manner analogous to the revision proposed for (O1), as follows:

\[(O2^\prime) \quad \text{It is subjectively obligatory for an agent, } s, \text{ to be } A \text{ just in case, in every possible world in which all the beliefs that } s \text{ ought subjectively to have are true, it would be objectively obligatory for } s \text{ to be } A.\]

For we are assuming that the beliefs Daphne has are precisely the beliefs she ought subjectively to have. Thus, since it is objectively impermissible for her to save the dolphins in all the worlds in which her beliefs are true, it follows that it is objectively impermissible for her to save the dolphins in all the worlds in which the beliefs she ought to have are true. And so \((O2^\prime)\) implies
that it is subjectively impermissible for her to save the dolphins.

In order the argument from over-demandingness to work, what is required is that it is possible for there to be some agent, \( s \), and some act, \( \phi \) such that,

i. In every world in which all of \( s \)'s beliefs are true, she is objectively obligated to \( \phi \)

ii. In every world in which all the beliefs \( s \) ought subjectively to have are true, she is objectively obligated to \( \phi \).

iii. It is subjectively permissible for \( s \) not to \( \phi \) (or in other words, \( s \) could rationally \( \phi \)).

iv. It is subjectively permissible for \( s \) not to believe that she ought objectively to \( \phi \).

I have suggested that the case in which \( s \) is Daphne and \( \phi \)-ing is saving the chimpanzees rather than the dolphins may be a case of this kind. But might deny that this really is a case of this kind, and one might deny, further, that there could be any cases of this kind. I will conclude this section by arguing that there must be cases of this kind.

I assume there could be cases in which a person ought objectively to nod his head if and only if he is presented with a true mathematical proposition. (This might be true, for example, if a demon will severely punish him for failing to nod his head if and only if he is presented with a true mathematical proposition.) Suppose Kurt is in a situation of this kind. Assume that Kurt has good eye-sight, and that mathematical propositions are presented to Kurt in a very clear and unambiguous way, so that the mathematical proposition he is presented with always coincides with the mathematical proposition that he ought to believe that he is presented with, and with the mathematical proposition that he in fact believes he is presented with. Thus, whenever he is presented with the proposition “\( 2 + 2 = 4 \),” he ought to believe that his is presented with this proposition, and he does in fact believe that he is presented with this proposition. Suppose, further, that Kurt believes, and ought to believe, that he ought objectively to nod his head if and only if he is presented with a true mathematical proposition.
Some mathematical propositions are true but unprovable (this follows from Gödel’s incompleteness theorem). And presumably, if a mathematical proposition is true but unprovable, Kurt could fail to believe it without irrationality. Assume $g$ is such a proposition, and that Kurt is presented with $g$. Since Kurt could fail to believe that $g$ is true without irrationality, Kurt could be presented with $g$ and fail to nod without irrationality. But since $g$ is true, $g$ is true in every possible world. And since Kurt believes, and ought to believe, that that he is presented with $g$, and that he ought objectively to nod his head just in case he is presented with a true mathematical proposition, it follows that in every world in which Kurt’s beliefs are true, he ought objectively to nod his head—and it likewise follows that in every world in which the beliefs Kurt ought to have are true, he ought objectively to nod his head. Thus, both (O1’) and (O2’) imply, incorrectly, that Kurt ought subjectively to nod his head when presented with $g$, or in other words, that Kurt could not rationally fail to nod his head when presented with $g$.

(ORPHANED FOOTNOTES)


See Greenspan (1975)."

The example I will use differs from the one used by Broome, which he gets from Parfit, and which Parfit gets from Donald Regan. For the original example invites a moral interpretation of the term ‘ought.’ And it may well be true that the moral ought is always evidence-relative. For the moral ought is connected with the notion of blame, and what agents are blameworthy for depends on the evidence available to them. But even if there is no evidence-nonrelative moral sense of ‘ought’, it does not follow that there is no evidence nonrelative sense of ought.

See Broome, “Ought” (unpublished manuscript).

It is conceivable that in some situations, there are infinitely many atomic options, since there may be situations in which there is a continuum of relevantly different options. But even so, one’s options will always be analyzable into atomic options.

To be more precise, it is a rational requirement that if one believes that the option of $\phi$-ing is
atomic and that one ought objectively to φ, then one does not intend to φ, nor does one suspend judgment concerning whether to φ (where suspending judgment concerning whether to φ is understood as a genuine attitude, and not merely as absence of any intention to φ or not to φ). It may be that it can be rationally permissible temporarily to believe that the option of φ-ing is atomic and that one ought objectively to φ without having any practical attitudes whatever concerning whether to φ.

Climbing The Mountain, p. 2. The actual text says “if” rather than “if and only if.” But in personal correspondence, Parfit has indicated that he means to be presenting necessary and sufficient conditions for rationality, and not merely sufficient conditions for rationality.

As Broome points out, the rational obligation is of wide scope: one ought, rationally, to be such that (if one believes that one ought rationally to be A, then one is A). It does not follow that if one believes one ought rationally to be A, then one ought rationally to be A. If this did follow, then beliefs about rationality would be infallible. See Broome (1999).

To borrow an expression from Yeats, we might say that she is “dolphin-torn.”