The Irreducibility of Personal Obligation

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How are claims about what people ought to do related to claims about what ought to be the case? That is, how are claims about of personal obligation, of the form $s$ ought to $\varphi$, related to claims about impersonal obligation, of the form it ought to be the case that $p$? Many philosophers have held that the former type of claim can be reduced to the latter. In particular, they have held a view known as the Meinong-Chisholm Reduction, which is sometimes stated as follows:

**MCR:** ‘$s$ ought to $\varphi$’ is logically equivalent to ‘it ought to be the case that $s$ $\varphi$.$s$.’

And which is sometimes stated as follows:

**MCR\_stt:** ‘$s$ ought to see to it that $p$’ is logically equivalent to ‘it ought to be the case that $s$ sees to it that $p$.’

In the next two sections, I will present counterexamples to MCR and to MCR\_stt, respectively, counterexamples that involve multiple agents. In the third section, I will generalize the results of the first two sections, and argue that no reduction of personal obligation to unconditional impersonal obligation can succeed. And in the final section, I argue that personal obligation likewise cannot be reduced to conditional impersonal obligation. I conclude with a brief discussion of the significance of these results.

1. **A Counterexample to MCR**

Consider the following case:

**Campus Visit:** Professor Wagstaff is visiting Huxley University where he has been offered a professorship. Baravelli is the chair of the hiring committee, and it is his job to accompany Wagstaff throughout his visit. Wagstaff has promised that he will go to departmental colloquium at noon. But instead he goes to the local saloon, and nothing Baravelli can do would persuade him to do otherwise.
In this case, the following claims all appear to be true at noon:

1. Wagstaff goes to the saloon.
2. Baravelli ought to accompany Wagstaff.
3. Since Wagstaff goes to the saloon, Baravelli’s going to the saloon is a necessary means to his accompanying Wagstaff.
4. Wagstaff ought to go to the colloquium.
5. Necessarily, if Wagstaff goes the colloquium, and Baravelli accompanies him, then Baravelli does not go to the saloon.

These five claims are jointly inconsistent with the conjunction of MCR and the following four principles:

P1. For any two propositions, \( p \) and \( q \), if it ought to be the case that \( p \), and it ought to be the case that \( q \), then it ought to be the case that \( (p \text{ and } q) \).

P2. For any two propositions, \( p \) and \( q \), if it ought to be the case that \( p \), and if (necessarily, if \( p \) then \( q \)), then it ought to be the case that \( q \).

P3. There is no proposition, \( p \), such that it ought to be the case that \( (p \text{ and not-}p) \).

P4. For any agent, \( s \), and any two action types, \( \varphi \) and \( \psi \), if \( s \) ought to \( \varphi \), and if \( s \)’s \( \psi \)-ing is a necessary means to her \( \varphi \)-ing, then \( s \) ought to \( \psi \).

This inconsistency can be shown by the following derivation:

6. Baravelli ought to go to the saloon. [2, 3, P4]
7. It ought to be the case that Baravelli goes to the saloon. [6, MCR]
8. It ought to be the case that Wagstaff goes to the colloquium. [4, MCR]
9. It ought to be the case that Baravelli accompanies Wagstaff. [2, MCR]
10. It ought to be the case that Wagstaff goes to the colloquium and Baravelli accompanies him. [8, 9, P1]
11. It ought to be the case that Baravelli does not go to the saloon. [5, 10, P2]
(12) It ought to be the case that Baravelli goes to the saloon and Baravelli does not go to the saloon. [7, 11, P1]

Clearly, (12) is incompatible with (P3). And so if we assume claims (1) through (5), as well as principles (P1) through (P4) and MCR, we can derive a contradiction. Thus, since (1) through (5) all appear to be true in *Campus Visit*, and since P1 through P4 all appear to be very plausible principles, there appears to be strong reason to reject MCR.

One option available to the defender of MCR is to deny that (1) through (5) are all true in *Campus Visit*. She might do so by rejecting (3), on the following grounds:

Even though, as a matter of fact, Wagstaff goes to the saloon, Wagstaff nonetheless *could* go to the colloquium. Hence, there is a way that Baravelli could accompany Wagstaff without going to the saloon: this would involve both agents going to the colloquium. Therefore, Baravelli’s going to the saloon is not a necessary means to his accompanying Wagstaff.

But this inference is invalid. From the premise that, if other agents acted differently, $s$ could $\varphi$ without $\psi$-ing, it does not follow that, in the actual world, $\psi$-ing is not a necessary means to for $s$ to $\varphi$. Thus, from the fact that, if the Queen decreed that the Crown Jewels shall be moved to the United States, I could see the Crown Jewels without going to England, it does not follow that going to England is not a necessary means for me to see the Crown Jewels. Going to England is indeed a necessary means for me to see the Crown Jewels because, given facts that are outside my control (including the fact that the Queen makes no such decree), the only way I can see the Crown Jewels is by going to England. Similarly, in *Campus Visit*, going to the saloon is indeed a necessary means for Baravelli to accompany Wagstaff because, given facts that are outside Baravelli’s control (including the fact that Wagstaff goes to the saloon), the only way Baravelli can accompany Wagstaff is by going to the saloon.

An alternative option available to the defender of MCR is to deny (2). She might object to this claim as follows:
In *Campus Visit*, we are concerned with the actions Baravelli and Wagstaff perform at noon, and so we are concerned with the simultaneous actions of two agents. But if these actions are genuinely simultaneous, then whether Baravelli accompanies Wagstaff will depend not only on the choices Baravelli makes, but also on the choices Wagstaff makes. Consequently, whether Baravelli accompanies Wagstaff isn’t up to Baravelli. And if it isn’t up to Baravelli whether he accompanies Wagstaff, then it cannot be the case that Baravelli ought to accompany Wagstaff. And so (2) is false.

This objection, however, cannot coherently be made by anyone who accepts MCR in conjunction with P1 and P2. For consider a case in which Mary ought to brush her teeth at noon, and Peter ought to brush his teeth at noon. In this case, by MCR, it ought to be the case that Mary brushes her teeth at noon, and it ought to be the case that Peter brushes his teeth at noon. And so, by P1, it ought to be the case that Mary brushes her teeth at noon and Peter brushes his teeth at noon. And necessarily, if Mary and Peter both brush their teeth at noon, then Mary brushes her teeth at the same time as Peter brushes his. And so, by P2, it ought to be the case that Mary brushes her teeth at the same time as Peter brushes his. Hence, by MCR, Mary ought to brush her teeth at the same time as Peter brushes his. But whether Mary brushes her teeth at the same time as Peter brushes his depends not only on Mary’s choices, but also on Peter’s choices. Therefore, anyone who accepts P1, P2 and MCR must allow that it can be the case that an agent ought to do something that requires the cooperation of other agents. And so anyone who accepts these principles should allow that it can be the case that Baravelli ought to accompany Wagstaff.

2. A Counterexample to MCR<sub>stit</sub>

Perhaps we can solve this problem by moving to a revised version of the Meinong-Chisholm Reduction, as follows:

\[
\text{MCR}_{\text{stit}}: \quad \text{‘} s \text{ ought to see to it that } p \text{’ is logically equivalent to ‘it ought to be the case that } s \text{ sees to it that } p.\text{’}
\]

This principle can be seen as a restricted version of MCR, in which \( q \) ranges not over any way of acting, but only over ways of acting that consist in seeing to it that some proposition
obtains. John Horty has persuasively argued that MCR\textsubscript{sit} has a number of advantages over MCR. He has also clarified MCR\textsubscript{sit} by offering an account of what it is for an agent to see to it that \( p \), for an arbitrary proposition \( p \). On his account, for \( s \) to see to it that \( p \) is for \( s \) to act in such a way as to ensure that \( p \) obtains regardless of how other agents may act.\(^3\)

When MCR\textsubscript{sit} is read in this way, then it may be able to avoid the problem for MCR that we saw in the previous section. For this problem arises because it seems that in \textit{Campus Visit}, Baravelli ought to accompany Wagstaff. And hence, it follows, by MCR, that it ought to be the case that he accompanies Wagstaff. But no analogous conclusion can be drawn from MCR\textsubscript{sit}. Of course, if we assumed that Baravelli ought to see to it that he accompanies Wagstaff, then we could indeed infer, from MCR\textsubscript{sit}, that it ought to be the case that Baravelli sees to it that he accompanies Wagstaff. But Baravelli cannot see to it that he accompanies Wagstaff, since there is nothing he can do that would ensure that he accompanies Wagstaff regardless of how Wagstaff acts. And so it is false that Baravelli ought to see to it that he accompanies Wagstaff. And so we cannot infer, from MCR\textsubscript{sit}, that it ought to be the case that he sees to it that he accompanies Wagstaff.

One objection that could be raised to MCR\textsubscript{sit} is that it provides a reduction of only a very special class of claims about personal obligation, namely, claims about what agents ought to see to, or act in such a way as to ensure. But we often say things of the form “\( X \) ought to dance with \( Y \)” or “\( X \) ought to marry \( Y \)”, or “\( X \) ought to buy a loaf of bread from \( Y \)” And in such cases, what we are saying \( X \) ought to do is some action that she is not in a position to guarantee, or to see to it that she performs, since it requires the cooperation of \( Y \). Thus, there is a wide variety of claims about personal obligation for which MCR\textsubscript{sit} fails to provide a reduction. But while MCR\textsubscript{sit} does not by itself provide a complete reduction of personal obligation claims, it might perhaps do so when conjoined with some appropriate bridge principle connecting what an agent ought to do with what she ought to see to. Perhaps, for
example, an agent ought ϕ just in case, in her actual circumstances, if she were to fulfill all her obligations to see to it that propositions obtain, she would thereby ϕ.

A more serious problem for MCR\textsubscript{stit} is that it appears to have unacceptable consequences. Horty himself has argued that MCR\textsubscript{stit} has unacceptable consequences in cases involving gambles. His argument, however, rests on a particular analysis of impersonal obligation that the defender of MCR\textsubscript{stit} needn’t accept. Here I will present what I take to be a more theory-neutral objection to MCR\textsubscript{stit}. My objection is based on the following case:

**Coordination.** Wagstaff has been offered a professorship at Huxley University, and he has promised to meet Baravelli at 4 p.m. to sign the contract. Baravelli has likewise promised to meet Wagstaff at 4 p.m. If they fail to meet at this time, then the deal will fall through, which will be worse for everyone. Unfortunately, they didn’t specify where they would meet, and there are two possible places where they could meet, at opposite ends of the campus: Baravelli’s office, and the main office.

Here there are two options available to Baravelli: he can either go to his own office, or he can go to the main office. And which office he goes to does not depend on the actions of any other agent. Thus, if he were to go to his own office, he would thereby see to it that he goes to his own office, and if he were to go to the main office, he would thereby see to it that he goes to the main office. And so we can represent Baravelli’s choice situation as one in which his two options are seeing to it that he goes to Baravelli’s office and seeing to it that he goes to the main office.

On its own, MCR\textsubscript{stit}, does not allow us to derive any normative consequences concerning Coordination, but it does allow us to derive some very peculiar normative consequences if we adopt any of a range of very standard normative theories. Consider the following normative theory:

**Objective Act Consequentialism:** Necessarily, in any given choice situation, an agent ought to perform whatever action would have the best consequences under her circumstances.
where these circumstances include all those facts over which she has no control, including the independent actions of other agents. It follows from Objective Act Consequentialism that

(13) Baravelli ought to see to it that he goes to the main office.

For, given his circumstances, and in particular, given the fact that Wagstaff goes to the main office, this is the option that would have the best consequences. Hence, by MCR\textsubscript{sit},

(14) It ought to be the case that Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the main office.

Similarly, it follows from Objective Act Consequentialism that

(15) Wagstaff ought to see to it that he goes to Baravelli’s office.

For, given Wagstaff’s circumstances, including the fact that Baravelli goes to Baravelli’s office, this is the option that would have the best consequences. Hence, by MCR\textsubscript{sit},

(16) It ought to be the case that Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to Baravelli’s office.

And so, by P1,

(17) It ought to be the case that Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the main office and that Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to Baravelli’s office.

However, in \textit{Coordination}, necessarily, if the two agents act in this manner, then the deal will fall through, which is the worst possible outcome. That is,

(18) Necessarily, if Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the main office and Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to Baravelli’s office, then the worst possible outcome will obtain.

And so we can infer, by P2,

(19) It ought to be the case that the worst possible outcome obtains.

Thus, if we accept P1, P2, and MCR\textsubscript{sit}, then we must maintain that it follows logically from Objective Act Consequentialism that, in \textit{Coordination}, it ought to be case that the worst possible outcome obtains. And this is a rather surprising result: while it is generally agreed that Objective Act Consequentialism has counterintuitive implications, the implication that
the worst possible outcome ought to obtain is not generally thought to be among them. Indeed, this implication would seem to undermine Objective Act Consequentialism, for if, in Coordination, it ought to be the case that the worst possible outcome obtains, then it’s hard to see how each agent could have a duty to act in such a way as to make things go as well as possible.

Furthermore, if we accept MCR_{stit}, along with (P1) and (P2), then we must conclude that Objective Act Consequentialism has even more surprising implications. Let \( q \) be the proposition that Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the main office and Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to Baravelli’s office. Thus, (17) is equivalent to

\[(17^*) \text{ It ought to be the case that } q.\]

Now the following two claims are clearly true:

\[(20) \text{ Necessarily, if } q, \text{ then Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the main office.} \]
\[(21) \text{ Necessarily, if Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the main office, then under Wagstaff’s circumstances, the option available to Wagstaff with the best consequences is to see to it that he goes to the main office.} \]

And from Objective Act Consequentialism, we may infer

\[(22) \text{ Necessarily, if, under Wagstaff’s circumstances, the option available to Wagstaff with the best consequences is to see to it that he goes to the main office, then Wagstaff ought to see to it that he goes to the main office.} \]

But assuming MCR_{stit},

\[(23) \text{ Necessarily, if Wagstaff ought to see to it that he goes to the main office, then it ought to be the case that Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to the main office.} \]

And so it follows, from (20), (21), (22) and (23) that

\[(24) \text{ Necessarily, if } q, \text{ then it ought to be the case that Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to the main office.} \]

Moreover,
Necessarily, if Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to the main office, then not-\(q\).

And from P2, by the necessitation rule,

\[\text{(26) Necessarily, (if it ought to be the case that Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to the main office, and if, necessarily (if Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to the main office, then not-}\neg q\text{), then it ought to be the case that not-}\neg q\text{)}\]

And so we can infer, from (25) and (26),

\[\text{(27) Necessarily, if it ought to be the case that Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to the main office, then it ought to be the case that not-}\neg q\text{.}\]

Hence, from (24) and (27),

\[\text{(28) Necessarily, if } q \text{, then it ought to be the case that not-}\neg q\text{.}\]

Thus, \(q\) is a proposition that ought to obtain, and yet, necessarily, if it were to obtain, it would be impermissible. And so, assuming P1, P2, and MCR\text{mit}, it follows from Objective Act Consequentialism that there are obligations that cannot be permissibly satisfied.

Nor is this a special problem for Objective Act Consequentialism. Assuming (P1), (P2), and MCR\text{mit}, any normative theory that allows for the possibility of coordination problems of the form just considered will entail that there are obligations that cannot be permissibly satisfied. Consider, for example, a deontological theory that includes the following principle:

\textbf{Fidelity Principle}: Necessarily, in any given situation, an agent ought to do what is required in order to break the fewest promises she can under her circumstances.

where these circumstances include all those facts over which she has no control, including the independent actions of other agents. The Fidelity Principle, like Objective Act Consequentialism, entails that, in Coordination, if Baravelli goes to his own office and Wagstaff goes to the main office, then Baravelli ought to go to the main office and Wagstaff ought to go to Baravelli’s office. And the Fidelity Principle likewise entails that, in Coordination, necessarily, if Baravelli goes to the main office and Wagstaff goes to Baravelli’s office, then Baravelli ought to go to his own office and Wagstaff ought to go to Baravelli’s office, then Baravelli ought to go to his own office and Wagstaff ought to go to Baravelli’s office.
the main office. Therefore, assuming P1, P2, and MCR, the Fidelity Principle, like Objective Act Consequentialism, entails that there are circumstances in which it ought to be the case that \( q \), and yet, necessarily, if \( q \) were true, then it ought to be the case that not-\( q \).

Now there is a clear sense in which a prescription that cannot be permissibly satisfied is an unacceptable prescription. Thus, if we accept P1, P2, and MCR, we must conclude that in situations like Coordination, a wide range of standard normative theories make prescriptions which, by their own lights, are unacceptable. And so if we want to avoid this result, and we don’t want to reject P1 or P2, then we must reject MCR. And, since MCR is stronger than MCR, if we reject MCR we must also reject MCR.

3. Why Personal Obligation is Irreducible to Unconditional Impersonal Obligation

I have argued against two ways of reducing personal to impersonal obligation, namely MCR and MCR. I will now argue, more generally, that no attempt to analyze personal obligation in terms of unconditional impersonal obligation can succeed, since two theories can differ in their implications concerning what agents ought to do without differing in their implications concerning what ought to be the case.

Let T1 be a normative theory that can be expressed thus:

T1: At any given time, if a job candidate is visiting a department where a colloquium is about to begin,

(a) the job candidate ought to go to the colloquium;

(b) the chair of the hiring committee ought to go to the colloquium;

(c) it ought to be the case that the obligations stated in (a) and (b) are satisfied.

And let T2 be a normative theory that can be expressed thus:

T2: At any given time, if a job candidate is visiting a department where a colloquium is about to begin,
(a*) the job candidate ought to go to the colloquium;
(b*) the chair of the hiring committee ought to go wherever the job candidate goes;
(c*) it ought to be the case that the obligations stated in (a*) and (b*) are satisfied.

Theories T1 and T2 have the exact same implications concerning what ought to be the case. For each of these theories applies only in contexts in which a job candidate is visiting a department where a colloquium is about to begin. And in such contexts, what ought to be the case, according to T1, is whatever is required for the joint satisfaction of the obligations stated in (a) and (b). And what ought to be the case, according to T2, is whatever is required for the joint satisfaction of the obligations stated in (a*) and (b*). But the joint satisfaction of the former pair of obligations is logically equivalent to the joint satisfaction of the latter pair. And so what ought to be the case, according to T1, coincides with what ought to be the case, according to T2.

However, these two theories disagree concerning what agents ought to do. In Campus Visit, where Wagstaff goes to the saloon instead of the colloquium, T1 entails that Baravelli ought to go to the colloquium, whereas T2 entails that Baravelli ought to go to the saloon. Therefore, since T1 and T2 agree in all their implications concerning what ought to be the case, and differ in their implications concerning what agents ought to do, it follows that claims about what agents ought to do are not logically equivalent to claims about what ought to be the case.

Of course, if we were to accept MCR, along with (P1) and (P2), then we would have to maintain that T1 and T2 are logically equivalent theories. It seems clear, however, that T1 and T2 are not logically equivalent, as they differ in their implications concerning what Baravelli ought to do in Campus Visit. And so this gives us further reason to reject MCR.
So far I have been focusing on the view that claims about personal obligation are \textit{logically equivalent} to claims about impersonal obligation. I have done so because the proposed reductions of personal to impersonal obligation generally take the form of claims about logical equivalence. But one might propose a reduction that is not meant to be analytic. One might hold that while claims about personal obligation may not be logically equivalent to claims about impersonal obligation, these claims have the same truth conditions. Or one might hold the still weaker view that claims about personal obligation are necessarily materially equivalent to claims about impersonal obligation. Might such a weaker reduction succeed?

I believe the answer is no, for the following reason. As \textit{Campus Visit} and \textit{Coordination} both illustrate, it appears that what choice a given agent ought to make, at a time, $t$, may depend on what choices other agents actually make at $t$. It would seem, however, that what \textit{ought to be the case} at $t$ does not depend on what choices agents actually make at $t$. But if what an agent ought to do depends on the simultaneous choices of other agents, while what ought to be the case does not so depend, then it follows that what agents ought to do cannot supervene on what ought to be the case. And so it follows that personal obligation cannot be reduced to unconditional impersonal obligation.\textsuperscript{5}

\textbf{4. Why Personal Obligation is Irreducible to Conditional Impersonal Obligation}

One might propose the following diagnosis of why claims about personal obligation cannot be reduced to claims about unconditional impersonal obligation:

In evaluating obligation claims, be they personal or impersonal, we ask what is true in the deontically best possible worlds within some class of possible worlds. But the class of worlds we consider differs depending on whether we are evaluating personal or impersonal obligation claims. When evaluating claims about what a given agent ought to do, we hold fixed all those facts that are outside her control, and in particular, we hold fixed facts about the simultaneous choices of other agents. And so if, at time $t$, agent $x$ chooses to $\varphi$, then the only possibilities we
consider in determining what some other agent, \( y \), ought to do are possibilities in which \( x \) chooses to \( \varphi \). What \( y \) ought to do is whatever \( y \) does in the best of these remaining possibilities, in which everything outside her control is held fixed. By contrast, when we are evaluating claims about what ought to be the case, unconditionally, at \( t \), and in particular, about what it ought to be the case that agents do at \( t \), we do not hold fixed the choices made by any agents at \( t \). Even if, as a matter of fact, at \( t \), \( x \) chooses to \( \varphi \), still, in considering what ought to be the case at \( t \), we consider not only possibilities in which \( x \) chooses to \( \varphi \), but also possibilities in which \( x \) makes other choices, and we ask which of all these possibilities is best. Thus, if we are to reduce claims about an agent’s personal obligations to claims about impersonal obligation, we will need to restrict the range of possibilities we consider by holding fixed everything outside this agent’s control. Hence, we will need to reduce claims about the agent’s personal obligations not to claims about unconditional impersonal obligation, but rather to claims about conditional impersonal obligation. We might do so as follows:

**MCRc:** “\( x \) ought to \( \varphi \)” is logically equivalent to “conditional on the conjunction of all the facts that are outside \( x \)’s control, it ought to be the case that \( x \) \( \varphi \).”

Or we might do so as follows:

**MCRun-c:** “\( x \) ought to see to it that \( p \)” is logically equivalent to “conditional on the conjunction of all the facts that are outside \( x \)’s control, it ought to be the case that \( x \) sees to it that \( p \).”

where “it ought to be the case that \( p \), conditional on \( q \),” is understood to mean that among those possibilities in which \( q \) obtains, the possibilities that are optimal, from the deontic point of view, are all possibilities in which \( p \) obtains.

The proposed diagnosis and the proposed reduction appear prima facie to be very promising, as they allow us to solve all the problems we have considered so far. According to this diagnosis, in *Campus Visit*, when we ask what ought to be the case unconditionally, we must consider each of the following four possibilities:

A1: Wagstaff and Baravelli both go to the colloquium.

A2: Wagstaff and Baravelli both go to the saloon.

A3: Wagstaff goes to the saloon and Baravelli goes to the colloquium.

A4: Wagstaff goes to the colloquium and Baravelli goes to the saloon.

Of these possibilities, A1 is the only one in which no obligation is broken, and so this is the only one that is optimal from the deontic point of view. And so what ought to be the case is what is true in this possibility. Therefore, it ought to be the case that Baravelli goes to the
colloquium. However, according to this diagnosis, when we ask what Baravelli ought to do, we must restrict our attention to those possibilities that are available to Baravelli, holding fixed the independent actions of other agents, and we must determine which of these remaining possibilities are optimal. Since Wagstaff goes to the saloon, and since Baravelli has no control over this fact, the remaining possibilities are A2 and A3. And from the deontic point of view, A2 is better than A3, since A3 involves one additional broken promise. But in A2, Baravelli goes to the saloon, and indeed, sees to it that he goes to the saloon. Thus, among the possibilities in which the conjunction of facts outside Baravelli’s control obtain, the deontically best possibilities are ones in which Baravelli goes to the saloon, and sees to it that he does so. And so, conditional on the conjunction of all the facts outside Baravelli’s control, it ought to be the case that he goes to the saloon, and sees to it that he does so. Hence it follows from MCR that Baravelli ought to go to the saloon, and it follows from MCR that Baravelli ought to see to it that he goes to the saloon.

A similar analysis can be given for Coordination. Here it will follow, from the proposed diagnosis, that it is permissible that Baravelli goes to Baravelli’s office, and it is likewise permissible that Baravelli goes to the main office, since there are deontically optimal possibilities in which he does either of these things. But nonetheless, Baravelli ought to go to the main office, and he ought to see to it that he does so. For, holding fixed the facts that are outside Baravelli’s control, including the fact that Wagstaff goes to the main office, the deontically optimal possibilities are all ones in which Baravelli goes to the main office, and sees to it that he does so.

One objection to MCR and MCR is that they are not very illuminating. For, arguably, in Campus Visit, the way we know that A2 is better, from the deontic point of view, than A3 is that we know that in A2, Baravelli does what he ought to do, while in A3 he does not. Similarly, it might be argued that in Coordination, we know that the deontically optimal possibilities, among the possibilities in which Wagstaff goes to the main office, are
possibilities in which Baravelli goes to the main office, because we know if Wagstaff goes to the main office, then Baravelli ought to do the same. Thus, our grasp of the deontic ranking among possibilities, and hence our grasp of what ought to be the case conditional on the conjunction of facts outside a given agent’s control, is not independent of our grasp of this agent’s personal obligations. This objection, however, does not really threaten MCR$_c$ or MCR$_{init-C}$, since these are meant simply to state logical equivalences between two kinds of claims, not to provide a formula for figuring out what an agent’s obligations are.

A more serious problem for these principles, however, is that they yield incoherent results when combined with non-consequentialist normative principles, such as the Fidelity Principle. Since MCR$_c$ is stronger than MCR$_{init-C}$, it will suffice to show how this problem arises for latter principle. Consider the following case:

**Pinky Promise.** Professor Wagstaff is visiting Huxley University where he has been offered a professorship. Baravelli and Pinky have each promised to accompany Wagstaff throughout his visit. Wagstaff, worried that Pinky might get up to mischief if left unsupervised, has promised that he will not leave Pinky on his own, but that if he can attend the departmental colloquium without leaving Pinky on his own he will do so. None of the three agents has made any other promises.

Assume that in **Pinky Promise**, the only options available to the three agents are going to the colloquium and going to the saloon. And assume the agents act independently, and wherever each agent goes, he sees to it that he goes. Hence, there will be eight possibilities for where the three agents may go. But for our purposes we can focus on the four possibilities in which Pinky goes to the saloon, which are represented in the following diagram:
Here, B1 represents the possibility that Wagstaff goes to the colloquium and Baravelli and Pinky go to the saloon; B2 represents the possibility that Wagstaff and Baravelli go to the colloquium and Pinky goes to the saloon, and so on for the other two possibilities.

Now suppose that Wagstaff goes to the colloquium and Pinky goes to the saloon. In this case, since Baravelli has promised to accompany Wagstaff, the only way he can fulfill all his promises, under his actual circumstances, is to see to it that he goes to the colloquium. And so it follows from the Fidelity Principle that Baravelli ought to see to it that he goes to the colloquium. Therefore, assuming MCR_{stit-C}, it follows that, conditional on the conjunction of all the facts that are outside Baravelli’s control, it ought to be the case that Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the colloquium. Hence it follows that, among the possibilities in which all the facts outside of Baravelli’s control obtain—namely, B1 and B2—the deontically optimal possibilities are all ones in which Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the colloquium. And among these possibilities, B2 is the only possibility in which Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the colloquium. Consequently, assuming MCR_{stit-C}, the Fidelity Principle implies that B2 is better, from the deontic point of view, than B1.

Now suppose Baravelli goes to the colloquium and Pinky goes to the saloon. In this case, since Wagstaff has promised not to leave Pinky on his own, the only way Wagstaff can honor all his promises is to see to it that he goes to the saloon. And so it follows from the Fidelity Principle that Wagstaff ought to see to it that he goes to the saloon. Hence, assuming MCR_{stit-C}, it follows that, among possibilities in which Baravelli goes to the colloquium and

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<th>B1</th>
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<td>Wagstaff</td>
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<td>Baravelli</td>
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Pinky goes to the saloon, the deontically optimal possibilities are all ones in which Wagstaff sees to it that he goes to the saloon. Therefore, assuming MCR_{stit-C}, the Fidelity Principle implies that B3 is better, from the deontic point of view, than B2.

Now suppose that Wagstaff and Pinky both go to the saloon. In this case, since Baravelli has promised to accompany Wagstaff, it follows from the Fidelity Principle that Baravelli ought to see to it that he goes to the saloon. Hence, assuming MCR_{stit-Cs} it follows that among possibilities in which Wagstaff and Pinky both go to the saloon, the deontically optimal possibilities are all ones in which Baravelli sees to it that he goes to the saloon. Therefore, assuming MCR_{stit-Cs}, the Fidelity Principle implies that B4 is better, from the deontic point of view, than B3.

Suppose, finally, that Baravelli and Pinky both go to the saloon. In this case, since Wagstaff has promised that he will attend the departmental colloquium if he can do so without leaving Pinky on his own, and since, as a matter of fact, Wagstaff can attend the departmental colloquium without leaving Pinky on his own, it follows from the Fidelity Principle that Wagstaff ought to see to it that he goes to the colloquium. Hence, assuming MCR_{stit-Cs} it follows that, among the possibilities in which Baravelli and Pinky both go to the saloon, the deontically optimal possibilities are all ones in which Wagstaff goes to the colloquium. Therefore, assuming MCR_{stit-Cs}, the Fidelity Principle implies that B1 is better, from the deontic point of view, than B4.

Thus, assuming MCR_{stit-C}, the Fidelity Principle has the paradoxical implication that B4 is deontically better than B3, which is deontically better than B2, which is deontically better than B1, which, in turn, is deontically better than B4. Thus, unless we are willing to conclude that the Fidelity Principle is incoherent, or to reject the transitivity of the better-than relation, we must reject MCR_{stit-C}. And if we reject MCR_{stit-Cs}, we must also reject the stronger principle MCR_{Cs}.
I have argued that two prima facie promising attempts to reduce personal obligation to conditional impersonal obligation, namely MCR and MCR\textsubscript{disC}, are unsuccessful. But mightn’t some other attempt to analyze personal obligation in terms of conditional impersonal obligation be more successful? I believe the answer is no. For, just as I argued earlier that two normative theories can differ in their implications about personal obligation without differing in their implications about unconditional impersonal obligation, so likewise it seems that two normative theories can differ in their implications about personal obligation without differing in their implications about conditional impersonal obligation.

Consider the view that, in a deontically ideal world, there would be no broken promises, and that the more promises are broken in a given world, the worse this world is from the deontic point of view, or the more this world departs from the deontic ideal. One might hold such a view, while at the same time holding that each individual ought to be concerned with honoring her own promises, and hence that each individual’s duty is to break as few of her own promises as possible. Thus, there would appear to be a logically consistent theory, T3, consisting in the following two claims:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item [X.] A first possibility is better than a second possibility from the deontic point of view just in case the first possibility involves fewer broken promises.
  \item [FP.] Necessarily, in any given situation, an agent ought to do what is required in order to break the fewest promises she can under her circumstances.
\end{enumerate}

But the view that, from the deontic point of view, the fewer broken promises the better, also appears to be consistent with the claim that each individual ought to act so as to minimize the total number of broken promises. And so there would appear to be a logically consistent theory, T4, consisting in the conjunction of X and

\begin{enumerate}
  \item [FP'] Necessarily, in any given situation, an agent ought to reduce, as much as is possible under her circumstances, the total number of promises that are broken by herself or by other agents.
\end{enumerate}

Since theories T3 and T4 both include principle X, these two theories completely agree in how they rank possibilities from the deontic point of view. Therefore, since this ranking
determines the truth-values of claims about conditional impersonal obligation, it follows that T3 and T4 do not differ in their implications concerning conditional impersonal obligation. However, these two theories do differ in their implications concerning personal obligation. For T4 affirms, while T3 denies, that agents can be obligated to break their own promises in order to prevent promises made by other agents from being broken.

Of course, if one were to accept MCR_c or MCR_{stitC}, then one would deny that T3 is a coherent theory. But, as we have seen, these reductions are incompatible not only with T3 taken as a whole, but also with the Fidelity Principle, FP, taken on its own. And is seems clear that the Fidelity Principle is perfectly coherent. And so, from the fact that these reductions are incompatible with T3, we should not infer that T3 is incoherent.

It seems, therefore, that claims about personal obligation are not logically equivalent to claims about conditional impersonal obligation. But mightn’t they be necessarily materially equivalent to such claims? I believe, once again, that the answer is no. For given the standard account of conditional impersonal obligation, what ought to be the case, conditional on p, is whatever is true in the deontically best possibilities in which p is true. Hence, facts about conditional impersonal obligation supervene on impersonal evaluative facts. However, most of us accept certain non-consequentialist principles that are similar to the Fidelity Principle, in that they imply that facts about what people ought to do don’t supervene on any class of impersonal evaluative facts. But if facts about conditional impersonal obligation supervene on impersonal evaluative facts, while facts about personal obligation do not, then facts about personal obligation cannot supervene on facts about conditional impersonal obligation. And so it follows that claims about personal obligation are irreducible to claims about conditional impersonal obligation, just as they are irreducible to claims about unconditional impersonal obligation.
If I am right that the *ought* of personal obligation is irreducible to the *ought* of impersonal obligation, then there is reason to regard the former *ought* as the more central of the two. For only the former *ought* plays a direct role in the guidance of action. This can be seen if we consider a case in which personal and impersonal obligation come apart. Suppose that in *Campus Visit*, Baravelli knows that Wagstaff is going to the saloon and that he ought to accompany Wagstaff, and so he knows that he ought to go to the saloon. This knowledge should guide him to go to the saloon. But suppose he also knows that it ought to be the case that Wagstaff goes to the colloquium and that he accompanies Wagstaff, and so he knows that it ought to be the case that he goes to the colloquium. This knowledge should not guide him to go to the colloquium. Since an agent’s actions should be directly guided by her beliefs about what she ought to do, not by her beliefs about what it ought to be the case that she does, there is reason to regard the *ought* of personal obligation as the fundamentally normative *ought*. It appears, therefore, that the *ought* of personal obligation is both irreducible to, and more central than, the *ought* of impersonal obligation.

**References**


Acknowledgements omitted for blind review.

A version similar to MCR is first presented in [Meinong, 1917/1972]. And a version similar to MCR\textsubscript{str} is first presented in [Chisholm, 1964]. For other early works containing versions the Meinong-Chisholm Reduction, see [Kanger, 1957/1971] and [Anderson, 1962]. For more recent works in which this reduction figures, see [Jones and Sergot, 1996], [Santos and Carmo, 1996], and [Belnap, Perloff and Xu, 2001]. For a defense of the Meinong-Chisholm Reduction, see [Williams, 1981]. And for critical discussions, see [Krogh and Herrestad, 1996], [Horty 1996], [Horty, 2001], and [Schroeder, unpublished].

For Horty’s presentation of MCR\textsubscript{str}, see [Horty, 2001] 44-47. And for his discussion of the advantages of MCR\textsubscript{str} over MCR, see ibid. 50-53.

Horty’s problem arises within a particular utilitarian framework in which what ought to obtain is whatever obtains in the best possible outcomes. If one adopts this framework, and one also accepts MCR\textsubscript{str}, then one must conclude that an agent ought to take any gamble, no matter how risky, so long as the best possible outcome is one in which she take the gamble and wins. The defender of MCR\textsubscript{str}, might, however, hold that what ought to obtain is not what is true in the best possible outcomes simpliciter, but rather what is true in the outcomes that are deontically best, or best with respect to the fulfillment of obligations. Hence she might say that since no one is under any obligation to win gambles, it is not true that the deontically best outcomes are all ones in which one takes risky gambles and wins.

I have argued that facts about personal obligation do not supervene on, and hence cannot be reduced to, facts about unconditional impersonal obligation alone. It is compatible with this argument that facts about personal obligation may be reducible to some set of facts that includes facts about impersonal obligation. (Similar remarks apply to the argument of the next section.)

See [Broome, unpublished] where he argues that the fundamental concept of obligation must be directly action-guiding.