JOHN SEARLE\(^1\) has recently argued that it is sometimes possible to derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’, or more precisely, to derive a normative conclusion from non-normative premisses.\(^2\) His own example involves promising, and the theory with which he supports it involves an “institution” of promising without which promises would have no force, or, perhaps, there would be no promises. I do not intend to discuss his interesting argument or its difficulties here. But it has suggested to me that perhaps there is another, possibly easier, way of deriving normative conclusions from non-normative premisses.

Many ethical philosophers appear to accept the view that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. This view, which seems quite plausible, can perhaps be formulated more precisely as

\[(1) \text{Statements of the form } 'N \text{ ought to do } X' \text{ entail the corresponding statements of the form } 'N \text{ can (is able to) do } X.'\]

But (1) is equivalent to

\[(2) \text{Statements of the form } 'N \text{ cannot (is unable to) do } X' \text{ entail the corresponding statements of the form } 'It is not the case that } N \text{ ought to do } X'.\]

And (2) appears to say that there is a non-normative statement which entails a normative one.

A word first about the equivalence of (1) and (2). This is simply transposition, ‘p entails q’ being equivalent to ‘not-q entails not-p’. And people who accept (1) (or the formulation “‘ought’ implies ‘can’”) seem to understand it as being equivalent to (2). For the usual arguments for this view are primarily arguments for (2). We are asked to consider a case in which a certain action is impossible for a certain agent. Then we are asked whether it is not obvious that the agent cannot have an obligation to perform that action in the face of the impossibility of his performing it. And this is just to argue for (2).

Perhaps it will be doubted that (2) really does say that a non-normative statement entails a normative one. But the form of its antecedent

\[(2a) N \text{ cannot (is unable to) do } X\]

certainly appears to yield paradigms of non-normative statements when


\(^2\) Expressing the contrast as one between ‘factual’ and ‘normative’ statements embodies the assumption that normative statements are not factual. Since I do not hold this assumption I prefer the more neutral (and plainer) contrast of ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’.
the 'cannot' is causal. E.g., we get 'Fred cannot run a mile in less than five minutes' and 'Sally cannot now recall the address of her childhood home' as instantiations of (2a). If, despite all appearances to the contrary, these are normative statements after all, then it will indeed seem that the distinction between normative and non-normative has broken down. And with it will also break down the claim that normative conclusions cannot be derived from non-normative premisses.

If (2a) is accepted as yielding non-normative statements, then (2) tells us something about what some non-normative statements entail. But perhaps what they entail is not normative either. The consequent of (2) is

(2b) It is not the case that N ought to do X.

In (2b) we are not told what N ought to do, nor what he ought not to do. Might (2b) therefore not be a normative statement at all?

The contradictory of (2b) is

(2c) N ought to do X.

And (2c) yields paradigms of normative statements. Therefore, if (2b) is not normative we will have a case of a normative statement whose denial is not normative. And this looks odd. If I am called on to decide whether a person ought to perform a certain action it would appear that I am asked to make a normative judgment. But on this view I will be making a normative judgment only if I decide affirmatively, i.e., along the lines of (2c). But if I decide negatively, as in (2b), then my judgment is not normative at all. And this certainly seems implausible.

Even if (2a) is accepted as non-normative and (2b) as normative there may be a last objection. Someone may claim that (2a) does not by itself (or in conjunction with truths of logic) entail (2b), but does so only in conjunction with (2). And thus we do not yet have a case of a non-normative statement entailing a normative one.

But since (2) says that (2a) entails (2b) the objection as I have put it above is poorly phrased. It should, properly speaking, be reformulated as an objection to the word 'entails' in (2). The objector should reject (2) as false and should demand that the doctrine "'ought' implies 'can'" be expanded into some statement which does not say that (2a) entails (2b), but which in conjunction with (2a) will entail (2b). Without considering what such a formulation might be I propose to call it (2*).

But (2*) must fulfil another requirement as well. For if it is itself non-normative then the normative (2b) will again be entailed by the non-normative pair, (2a) and (2*). Therefore (2*) must be normative. It must not be a statement of logic or of conceptual analysis. People who

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1 (2b) must, of course, be distinguished from 'N ought not to do X'.
disagree about the truth of \((2^*)\) must not be disagreeing about logic or about the sense of words such as ‘ought’ and ‘can’. Rather, they must be involved in some first-order moral disagreement. One of them will say that sometimes you ought to do what you (causally or logically) cannot do, and the other will maintain that you never have such an obligation. And their controversy over this point will be moral. It will be like that between an absolute pacifist and someone who thinks you ought sometimes to fight for your country.

Perhaps this observation will serve to make the project of constructing \((2^*)\) seem an unpromising one to undertake. However, let us assume that, contrary to expectations, it is successfully carried out. Now consider the conjunction \((2a \text{ and } 2^*)\). It entails \((2b)\). Is it to be counted as normative or non-normative?

Perhaps it will be replied that this can be decided any way we like. So far as the present argument is concerned that is true. If \((2a \text{ and } 2^*)\) is non-normative then again we have a non-normative statement entailing one which is normative. On the other hand if \((2a \text{ and } 2^*)\) is normative, then its denial is a normative statement\(^1\) which is entailed by the non-normative statement, not-\((2a)\). Therefore, it appears that the construction of \((2^*)\), even if it should be possible, will not help in maintaining the thesis that the non-normative does not entail the normative.

It seems, therefore, that the doctrine that normative statements cannot be derived from non-normative ones can be maintained only at the cost of rejecting the doctrine that “‘ought’ implies ‘can’” and maintaining that abilities and obligations are unrelated, or at the cost of analyzing the “‘ought’ implies ‘can’” doctrine in somewhat implausible ways. If the latter alternative is taken it would be valuable to have some justification for the proposed analysis in addition to the fact that it preserves the disconnection between the non-normative and the normative.

\(^1\) This, of course, depends again on the view that the denial of a normative statement is also normative.

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**UNIVERSALISABILITY**

By ALAN RYAN

SINCE *The Language of Morals* first appeared there have been numerous attacks on the principle of universalisability; for the most part these attacks have been directed from a Sartrian viewpoint, and have been concerned chiefly to emphasise the smallness of the role of principles in our everyday coming to, and keeping of, moral decisions. I want to