

'Ought', 'Can', and Practical Reasons¹

Clayton Littlejohn

Many accept the principle that states that 'ought' implies 'can':

OIC: S ought to Φ only if S can Φ .²

As intuitive as OIC might seem, we should acknowledge that the arguments offered in its support often do not warrant the sort of confidence many of us have in the principle. For example, friends of OIC often say that the principle is needed to explain certain linguistic behaviors.³ Suppose Smith sees Jones sitting in a chair and Jones tells Smith that he has just been robbed. 'You ought to call the police', says Smith. When Jones tells him that he cannot because he has been tied to the chair, it is natural for Smith to recommend some alternative course of action. The reason, some say, is that in learning that Jones cannot get out of his chair to call the police, Smith learns from this alone that his initial remark was mistaken. In saying 'You ought to ask someone to help untie you' he recommends an alternative course of action and tries to correct his first remark.

If only it were this simple. Some chalk this up to conversational implicature. In discovering that his advisee cannot follow his advice, his offer of additional advice is proper because when we say someone ought to perform such and such an action, we would violate conversational maxims if we advise someone to perform an action knowing they will not follow this advice.⁴ Although the details of such proposals have been criticized, it is unlikely that we need OIC to explain Smith's linguistic behavior.⁵ Let us change examples. Having untied Jones, Smith heads with Jones to the hardware store. In addition to getting new locks for his doors, Jones had promised his mother that he would spruce up the place. 'You ought to buy some tile for the kitchen and leave the living room as is', says Smith. Jones says that he is unwilling to leave the living room walls the same drab color they are now. 'In that case, you should paint the walls yellow', says Smith. As before, it seems that Smith will advise a new course of action in learning something about Jones. In the previous case, learning that Jones is incapable of leaving his chair leads Smith to advise Jones to call for assistance, creating the appearance that he has taken back his original advice having recognized that it was mistaken. Having urged him to call the police initially, he advises him instead to ask someone to untie him. In this case, learning that Jones is unwilling to leave the living room the same drab color leads Smith to advise Jones to paint the walls yellow in spite of his previous advice to refrain from painting the walls. No one thinks that the proper explanation of this second bit of linguistic behavior appeals to the principle that 'ought' implies 'is willing'. Given the obvious parallels between the two cases and the utter implausibility

of the thesis that ‘ought’ implies ‘is willing’, it is unlikely that the case for OIC can be made simply on the basis of linguistic considerations.

Rather than try to establish OIC on the basis of these sorts of linguistic considerations, some have argued that the principle follows from some relatively uncontroversial claims about reasons for action. We can state the latest argument for OIC as follows:

- (1) If S ought to Φ , S has reason to Φ .
- (2) If S has a reason to Φ , Φ -ing is a potential action of S’s.⁶
- (3) If Φ -ing is a potential action of S’s, S can Φ .
- (C) If S ought to Φ , S can Φ .

In support of the argument’s crucial premise, (2), Vranas remarks:

[This premise] holds because reasons of any kind are conceptually linked to objects of the given kind: reasons for belief to potential beliefs, reasons for action to potential actions, and so on ... To my ears [(2)] has an almost tautological ring: how could reasons *for action*—as opposed to e.g., reasons *for belief*—fail to be conceptually linked to potential actions?⁷

It seems Vranas takes (2) to be a truism about practical reasons. While his question is not without rhetorical force, we shall see that what Vranas takes to be a truism about reasons for action is not true. For his part, Streumer suggests that if we deny (2), we no longer have a principled reason for rejecting talk of crazy reasons. For example, if reasons are not simply reasons to perform potential actions or actions the agent has the ability and opportunity to perform, we have no reason to say it is impossible for Smith to have reason to travel back in time to prevent the crusades.⁸ Because talk of crazy reasons is crazy talk, such talk is best avoided, as are views that encourage it.

The aim of this paper is to show that this latest line of argument for OIC fails. In arguing that the argument fails, we shall see that the reasons given for rejecting the argument are reasons friends of OIC have no principled reason to reject. There are two things to note about the argument for OIC. First, it seems that in specifying the truth-conditions for claims about what an agent can do, we have to take account of features of the circumstances the agent is in or is described as being in. While there are circumstances under which Jones steps out of a chair, in the situation described where Jones is bound to the chair by knots he cannot untie, we speak falsely if we say ‘Jones can get out of the chair to call the police’. According to (3), the actions an agent can perform in a given set of circumstances is a subset of potential actions, which we might think of as actions the agent has both the ability and opportunity to perform. According to (2),

there cannot be a reason for an agent to perform an action in circumstances where that action is not among the potential actions of the agent (i.e., actions the agent has both the ability and opportunity to perform or, simply, can perform). In short, just as the truth-conditions for the claim ‘S can Φ ’ ought to refer to the circumstances in which S is found or is described as being, the truth-conditions for claims about which actions are potential actions of S’s and what actions S has reason to do ought to refer to these same circumstances. If it is possible for circumstances to arise where S has reason to Φ but lacks either the ability or opportunity to Φ , (2) is false.

Second, note that in formulating OIC, ‘ought’ is taken to correspond to all things considered obligations and not to *prima facie* duties. This restriction is not unmotivated. It seems that *prima facie* obligations behave in ways that all things considered obligations do not.⁹ Whereas it seems friends of OIC would never say that an agent can be under a pair of incompatible all things considered obligations, it seems there is nothing to OIC that compels them to deny the possibility of conflicting *prima facie* obligations. If *prima facie* duties can arise in circumstances where corresponding all things considered obligations cannot, it seems an obvious strategy for arguing against (2) would be to show that just as *prima facie* duties are not subject to the same limiting conditions as all things considered obligations, the same holds true for the *reasons* associated with these duties. Such an argument would not necessarily give us any reason to reject OIC, so friends of OIC should not be terribly surprised by such an argument. In what follows, we shall see that an example involving conflicting *prima facie* obligations causes trouble for (2), the crucial assumption in the argument for OIC.

Jones is asked to give alms for the poor. Fishing around in his pockets, he realizes that he has spent the last of his alms on coffee and cigarettes. He does have a pocketknife. He knows he could chase down a passerby, kill him for his alms, and distribute those alms to the poor. On the one hand, reasons associated with the duty of beneficence are reasons for him to give alms to the poor. On the other hand, considerations of justice and reasons associated with the duty of non-maleficence give Jones good reason to refrain from murdering the passerby. As conflicts of duty go, this one is not terribly hard to resolve. The interesting question is not a question about what Jones should do. The interesting question is whether the reasons Jones has are reasons for potential actions of his. We shall see that in these circumstances he has practical reasons that are not reasons for actions that are potential actions of his.

Suppose we say:

(4) There is a reason for Jones to give alms to the poor.

If there is a *prima facie* duty of beneficence, it seems (4) is true. It also seems plausible to say two further things about this example:

- (5) The reason Jones has for giving alms to the poor (i.e., the reason associated with the duty of beneficence), is *not* a reason that has among its demands that Jones does whatever is necessary given the circumstances to give alms to the poor such as acting unjustly or against the reasons associated with the duty of non-maleficence.

It seems plausible to maintain that in the circumstances described, the reason Jones has for helping the poor is *not* a reason to murder the passerby and take his alms to distribute to others even though there is no potential action of Jones' that is his giving alms to the poor without his murdering the passerby to get the alms to distribute.

To see that this claim is not without its motivation, suppose Jones performs the unspeakable act. Jones murders the passerby and offers the dead man's alms to the poor. We would say that Jones' action was all things considered wrong. Would we say that he nevertheless did what the reason associated with the duty of beneficence asked of him? Foot apparently thought not:

Certainly benevolence does not require unjust action, and we should not call an act which violated rights an act of benevolence. It would not, for instance, be an act of benevolence to induce cancer in one person (or deliberately to let it run its course) even for the sake of alleviating much suffering.¹⁰

If Jones' killing the man and distributing the alms is *not* an action that does what the reasons associated with the duty of beneficence would have him do, then we should not say that in doing this deed Jones would have done what an overridden reason would have him do. Someone might reject (5) on the grounds that the reason associated with the duty of beneficence is cancelled rather than overridden. Or, they might object that in running this argument we are assuming that in stating principles of *prima facie* duty we cannot use *ceteris paribus* clauses.¹¹ Against the suggestion that the reason is cancelled and the duty of beneficence is only a conditional duty, note that in the example described it is reasonable for Jones to regret that he could not give alms to help the poor. If, however, the reason to help were cancelled because the duty of beneficence is but a conditional duty, it is hard to see how it could be reasonable for Jones to regret this. Suppose as Jones were fishing around in his pockets, Smith appeared and gave his alms to the poor. It might be that Smith's gift was so generous that there is no further need for assistance. In *this* circumstance, there is nothing for Jones to regret. The reason for Jones to help is cancelled rather than overridden and the condition necessary for the existence of a duty of Jones' to help no

longer satisfied. The natural explanation as to why it is reasonable for Jones to regret not helping in the first example, but not the second, is that there was a non-cancelled reason for Jones to help in the first example only.¹² That there is such a reason, however, indicates that the duty of beneficence is not a duty conditional on the absence of duties that give overriding reasons to make it all things considered wrong for Jones to help. Moreover, the argument does *not* assume that statements of principle of *prima facie* duty do not contain *ceteris paribus* clauses. It merely assumes that such clauses do not rule out the very possibility of conflicts of *prima facie* duty. If one were to insist that such clauses do rule out this possibility, one would have to explain the rationality of Jones' regret in the absence of any moral residue. This residue is often taken to indicate the presence of an overridden reason.

Depending on how we filled out the details of the example, we might have set up the example in such a way that Jones' killing the passerby and distributing his alms to the poor was optimistic. We might have set up the example in such a way that the reasons associated with a crude version of the greatest happiness principle *and* the reasons associated with the duty of beneficence would be reasons for Jones to give alms to the poor. It is noting that these reasons are similar in certain respects, but are not the very same reasons. One reason to think that the utilitarian conception of beneficence and the benevolent act is perverse is precisely because the reason the utilitarian says Jones has is a reason to promote the welfare of others *by any means necessary*. If, however, the utilitarian is wrong about what the duty of beneficence truly demands of us, we might appeal to (5) in an attempt to explain the mistake. The reason that Foot and others think the utilitarian view is repugnant is precisely because the reasons the utilitarian says we have to promote welfare are the kinds of reasons that can serve as reasons to perform unjust and brutal actions if the circumstances are such that such brutal and unjust actions are necessary for the promotion of welfare. If those reasons were associated with the duty of beneficence, it seems that we would say that just as there is *no* duty to bring our actions in line with the greatest happiness principle, the duty of beneficence is no more a duty than the duty to be chaste or the duty to refrain from being uppity are duties. These are not genuine duties because they tell us we have reasons we know there could not be. The reasons associated with the duty of beneficence, assuming there is such a thing, distinguish themselves from the reasons associated with the greatest happiness principle precisely because they ask us to promote welfare without thereby asking us to ignore considerations of justice. To anthropomorphize a bit, the reason associated with the duty of beneficence might remind you on occasion that it had asked you to give alms to the poor, but it would never confess to being a tad disappointed that you did not murder to do it even if that would have been necessary for securing the alms for distribution.

Someone might insist that it would be impossible for our duty of beneficence to demand that Jones give alms to the poor without thereby demanding that Jones do whatever must be done to give alms to the poor. They might concede that (4) is intuitive when considered in isolation. They might concede that (5) is plausible for precisely the sort of reasons that Foot offers. However, they will insist that while these claims might be plausible taken independently, they are jointly inconsistent. It is a general principle, they might say, that if R is a reason for S to Φ in C , and Ψ -ing is the sole means by which S might Φ in C , R is a reason to Ψ in C . The reason might be a *prima facie* reason only, but there must be this reason. Similarly, if S is forced to choose between Φ -ing and Ψ -ing, R is a reason for S to Φ in C only if R is a reason to refrain from Ψ -ing in C .¹³ So, in the case at hand, insofar as the duty of beneficence says that there is a reason to give alms that can be given only if Jones kills the passerby, it is a reason to murder or not refrain from murdering. We cannot have it both ways.

This line of objection seems mistaken. Suppose Jones is out for his morning constitutional when he sees a man has just fallen into the river. Seeing the man struggle to pull himself to shore and knowing that he is in serious danger of being pulled away from the bank, Jones has a reason to lend the man a hand. The next day Smith heads down this same path on the way to meet his friend Jones as he has promised to do. Smith sees a man has just fallen into the river. Seeing the man struggle to pull himself to shore and knowing that he is in serious danger of being pulled away from the bank, Smith has a reason to lend the man a hand. In general, the strength of the case for Φ -ing will be a function of both the reasons that favor Φ -ing and the reasons that speak against Φ -ing. It seems that the case for Smith to assist and for Jones to assist are equally strong. If this is right, it follows that the reasons that Smith had for keeping his appointment with Jones were *not* reasons to refrain from helping the man. The reason associated with the duty of fidelity did not have among its demands the demand that Smith refrain from helping the man in the river even though the circumstances were such that Smith could not help without missing his appointment and failing to keep his promise. So, it seems that the assumption needed to show that (4) is incompatible with (5) (i.e., that if R is a reason for S to Φ in C , R is a reason to refrain from performing actions incompatible with Φ -ing in C) is false.

We can now state the argument against (2). According to (2), it can only be that (4) and (5) are true in circumstances where a potential action of Jones' is giving alms to the poor without murdering someone to secure those alms. Given the circumstances, however, this is not a potential action of Jones'. He does not have the ability and opportunity to assist the poor without first killing the passerby. So, it seems that a defense of (2) requires one to choose between two options. First, in defending (2) someone can accept (5) and then deny that a pair of (non-

conditional) *prima facie* duties places incompatible demands on Jones. Either there is *no* reason to assist or no reason not to murder. In saying this, one must explain how it could be reasonable for Jones to regret not being able to help the poor or deny that such regret is reasonable. Insofar as it seems that Jones' regret is reasonable, explaining that regret involves recognizing a kind of moral residue, and understanding that residue requires us to acknowledge that there is an overridden reason rather than a cancelled one, this option is not attractive. Alternatively, someone can accept (4) while denying (5). One can thump the table and insist that the duty of beneficence does have among its demands the demand that we kill strangers with an eye towards helping others and insist that we really have *prima facie* reason to do this. The problem with either response is that a description of our case that accommodates (4) and (5) allows us to say much of what we want to say about the case and is not obviously incoherent. That this description is incompatible with (2) suggests that (2) is hardly the truism that Vranas made it out to be. Moreover, this description of the example suggests that the kinds of reasons we need to cause trouble for (2) are not the sorts of reasons that would lead one to question OIC. All that is needed are reasons associated with *prima facie* duties.

The argument's crucial premise and, arguably, its Achilles' heel, asserts that we can have reasons only to perform potential actions. Given that any potential action of ours is an action we can perform, the circumstance-relativity of claims about what we 'can' do force us to say that an action is a potential action of ours only in circumstances where we can perform that action. In turn, the argument works only if reasons are reasons only under those circumstances where we could perform the actions they serve as reasons for. If, as has been argued, we have reasons to Φ in circumstances where we lack the opportunity or ability to Φ , we ought to reject (2). Vranas thought that (2) was a sort of truism about practical reasons. The question 'How could reasons for action—as opposed to e.g., reasons for belief—fail to be conceptually linked to potential actions?' has rhetorical force, but we shall see that we can deny (2) while allowing that there is *some* conceptual connection between reasons for action and potential actions even if (2) is false. Moreover, if favorers constitute practical reasons, we have little reason to think (2) captures some important truth about those reasons. Let us consider these points further.

Note that the conceptual connection between reasons for action and potential actions needed for the argument is a strong one. To avoid having to say that there can be reasons for an agent to Φ in circumstances in which the agent cannot Φ , we had to assume that there can only be reason for an agent to Φ in some set of circumstances if Φ -ing is a potential action of the agent's in those very circumstances. We can say that there is *a* conceptual connection between reasons for action and potential actions if we simply went with the weaker claim that S can have

reason to Φ only if there is some circumstance or other in which Φ -ing is a potential action of the agent's.¹⁴ In our examples, there was a reason for Jones to give alms to the poor. While Jones' reason was not a reason for him to do what was necessary to give alms to the poor in those circumstances and his heeding the duty of beneficence was not a potential action of his, there may well be other circumstances in which Jones' heeding this duty was something he could have done if he only tried. Thus, even if we were to agree that only by linking practical reasons with potential actions could we distinguish reasons for action from reasons for belief, we still have no reason to think this connection is properly described by (2). Indeed, we have reason to think it has not.

Recall that in his defense of the argument's crucial premise, Streumer claims that if we sever the connection between the conditions under which we have reasons to Φ from the circumstances in which we can Φ , we will have no principled reason to deny the possibility of 'crazy reasons' such as the reason we have to travel back in time to stop the spread of the black plague or (worse) stop the spread of the plague without bothering to time travel. Note that the cases we used to cause trouble for (2) were not crazy reasons. They were the sorts of reasons we often have when we find ourselves conflicted between two attractive courses of action only one of which we can pursue. It seems that if we weaken the connection between reasons for action and potential actions in the way just suggested, we have seen there is at least one principled way of denying (2) without thereby allowing for the possibility of such crazy reasons. Given that there is a world of difference between the case that causes trouble for (2) and the cases of crazy reasons, it seems that even if this principle proved too weak or too strong there would be many more candidates to consider before concluding that we have to choose between accepting (2) or recognizing crazy reasons as reasons.

Perhaps we should have been sceptical of (2) from the start. Consider the view that considerations that count in favor of an action constitute reasons for that action.¹⁵ If a consideration can stand in this favoring relation to some action and thereby constitute a reason for performing that action even if that action is not an action the agent has the opportunity or ability to perform, then we should reject (2). We shall see that it is not implausible to maintain that considerations that constitute reasons can stand in this favoring relation even if the thing the reason favors is *not* a potential action of the agent's. To see this, let us suppose actions are coarse-grained items that are tokens of a variety of act-types.¹⁶ On this picture, Jones' returning Smith's book might be Jones' keeping a promise to a friend, his disappointing his sister who had hoped to read the book by the pool, and his burning fossil fuels as he drives to Smith's apartment on the far side of town. On the view that reasons are favorers, that his returning the book would enable him

to keep his promise is a reason because it makes the action favorable. Combine this with the view that practical reasons are only reasons for potential actions. There is no potential action of Jones' that is his returning the book that is *not* his disappointing his sister and burning fossil fuels. So, the consideration that speaks in favor of returning the book can only do so by counting in favor of, *inter alia*, his disappointing his sister, his burning fossil fuels, and his keeping a promise to Smith. The trouble for this view emerges when we see that the view commits us to saying that *if* there is a reason for Jones to keep his promise, there is thereby a reason for his disappointing of his sister and his burning of fossil fuels. However, there seems to be nothing in the circumstance that favors disappointing his sister or burning the fossil fuels. There seems to be no contradiction and no mistake in Jones' saying 'Look, there was no reason to upset my sister, but it was unavoidable since I had to return Smith's book'. The claim would express a conceptual falsehood if practical reasons were reasons only for potential actions.

Contrast this with the view on which favorers are taken to be practical reasons, but reasons are understood as related to something less coarse-grained than token actions of an indefinite number of types such as actions under specific descriptions or aspects of actions. On such a view, Jones' reason has only to do with the fact that the book is returned rather than any particular token that is an instance of book returning, promise keeping, fossil fuel burning, and sister upsetting. Such a view seems better suited for making sense of two features of our practical situation. First, think about the phenomenon of rational regret. An agent might rationally regret that she did not Φ knowing that she ought all things considered to have Ψ 'd and knowing that she could not both Φ and Ψ . The natural explanation as to why an agent might rationally regret that she did not perform an action she knows she ought not to have performed is that there was something lacking from her Ψ -ing that spoke in favor of her Φ -ing.¹⁷ If that consideration that spoke in favor of her Φ -ing gave her *no* reason to act at all, her regret is hard to make sense of. On the view that reasons are reasons only for potential actions, given that she knows that she could not have Φ 'd without thereby doing what she ought all things considered not have done, she could only judge that there was reason for her to Φ in those circumstances if the defeated reason was, *inter alia*, a reason to do what she should not all things considered do. But, then she should not regret that she could not have acted on *that* reason.

Second, the view seems better placed to make sense of the observation that practical reasoning is non-monotonic. To say that practical reasoning is non-monotonic is to say that a piece of practical reasoning that proceeds from a set of premises to a conclusion might be perfectly acceptable even if that reasoning would not have been acceptable if additional premises were added.¹⁸ Suppose Jones were to reason initially as follows: If I head to Smith's this

afternoon, I could return his book and keep my promise, so this is what I shall do. He then realizes that if he put this plan into action and returned the book he would disappoint his sister and that the disappointment would be so great that he thinks it might be best just to return the book a few days later than promised. (Assume that she *really* wants to read the book and Smith will not be terribly upset by Jones' failure to keep his promise.) If there was nothing wrong with the initial inference, but there would be something wrong with Jones' inferring that he should return the book in light of the new information, practical reasoning is non-monotonic. If reasons only stood in relation to potential actions, it is difficult to see how this case could illustrate the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning. Remember that his keeping his promise would be a way of doing something he should all things considered not do and that if this case illustrates the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning, his initial inference would have to be a good one. Assuming that reasons are reasons only for potential actions of his, we would either have to say that the fact that his action would fulfill his promise would speak in favor of disappointing his sister terribly or that Jones has just discovered a further fact in light of which the fact that his action would be necessary for fulfilling his promise should not have figured in deliberation as a consideration that spoke in favor of returning the book. As the fact that the action would keep the promise does not speak in favor of disappointing his sister, we would have to say that Jones was initially unaware of a fact in light of which the consideration he took to favor returning the book was no reason at all. With no reason favoring the initial decision to return the book, our first case does not provide an example in which a bit of practical reasoning is good even if that reasoning would have been bad if additional reasons were brought to bear. If, as seems to be the case, there are two features of our practical situation that seem to make sense only if reasons stand in relation to features of actions we contemplate performing rather than potential actions, we have two theoretical reasons to doubt (2) in addition to the doubts generated by the example discussed earlier.

While OIC continues to strike many of us as obvious, it seems yet another attempt to justify the obvious has met with failure. The latest argument for OIC sought to establish that principle on the basis of relatively uncontroversial claims about reasons for action. It turns out that these claims are not merely subject to controversy. Upon close inspection, it seems that they are false. Practical reasons need not be reasons for potential action in the strong sense needed for this argument to work. Since we can have reasons to perform actions under circumstances where we cannot perform those actions, we again have to look elsewhere for an argument for OIC.

References:

Davidson, D. 1980. *Essays on Actions and Events*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Foot, P. 1985. Utilitarianism and the Virtues. *Mind* 94: 196-209.
- Goldman, A. 1971. The Individuation of Action. *Journal of Philosophy* 68: 761-64.
- Howard-Snyder, F. 2006. 'Cannot' Implies 'Not Ought'. *Philosophical Studies* 130: 233-46.
- Kenny, A. 1975. *Will, Freedom, and Power*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Ross, W. 1930. *The Right and the Good*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, T. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. 1984. 'Ought' Conversationally Implies 'Can'. *The Philosophical Review* 93: 249-61.
- Stocker, M. 1990. *Plural and Conflicting Values*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Streumer, B. 2003. Does 'Ought' Conversationally Implicate 'Can'? *European Journal of Philosophy* 11: 219-28.
- _____. 2007. Reasons and Impossibility. *Philosophical Studies* 136: 351-84.
- Vranas, P. 2007. I Ought, Therefore I Can. *Philosophical Studies* 136: 167-216.

¹ For written comments and discussion, the author would like to thank Aaron Boyden, Michael Conboy, Soraya Gollop, Robert Howell, Errol Lord, Luke Robinson, Bart Streumer, Steve Sverdlik, Brad Thomson, Mark van Roojen, and an anonymous referee for this journal.

² The 'ought' under consideration is the all things considered ought. It does not correspond to merely *prima facie* obligations.

³ For a recent example of this, see Howard-Snyder (2006: 236).

⁴ See Sinnott-Armstrong (1984) for a defense of the view that 'ought' merely conversationally implies 'can'.

⁵ Streumer (2003) criticizes Sinnott-Armstrong's (1984) proposal, but the second example suggests that the problems with a pragmatic approach to these examples is a problem of detail rather than principle. Note that there is no inconsistency in offering a pragmatic treatment of these examples while accepting OIC.

⁶ The notion of 'potential action' is a technical one and as Vranas (2007: 169) explains it, Φ -ing can only be a potential action of S's if S has both the ability and opportunity to Φ . As opportunity depends on circumstance, the truth-conditions for 'S can Φ ' must refer to the appropriate circumstances as well. The principle difference between Vranas' argument for OIC and Streumer's (2007: 357) argument is that Streumer speaks of 'possible actions' rather than 'potential actions'. On his view, Φ -ing is a possible action of S's if either there is a nomologically possible and historically close world in which S Φ 's or a nomologically possible and historically accessible world in which S Φ 's. The subtle differences between potential and possible actions will not concern us here. Do note, however, that just as Vranas must say that the truth-conditions for 'S can Φ ' must refer to circumstances in which Φ -ing is a potential action of S's, Streumer must say that the truth-conditions for 'S can Φ ' must refer to circumstances in which Φ -ing is a possible action of S's. Assuming (2), both authors must say that a reason for S to Φ can be a reason only under certain circumstances (i.e., those in which S can Φ).

⁷ Vranas (2007: 173).

⁸ Streumer (2007: 361).

⁹ As noted by Howard-Snyder (2006: 234).

¹⁰ Foot (1985: 205).

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising these possibilities.

¹² Both Ross (1930) and Stocker (1990) rely on this sort of test for determining whether the reason associated with the *prima facie* duty was cancelled or whether the duty was conditional in such a way that it generated no reason in these circumstances. Both take the rationality of regret as an indication that the reason was not cancelled, the reason was in fact generated, and that if the duty is conditional only the conditions necessary for the duty to apply to the agent nevertheless obtain.

¹³ If we let ‘ Φ ’ and ‘ Ψ ’ denote omissions as well as actions, this follows from the previous claim.

¹⁴ That we could deny (2) while maintaining some weaker connection between practical reasons and potential actions is something that I realized only after comments from an anonymous referee.

¹⁵ Scanlon (1998) has done much to popularize the view that treats favorers as reasons.

¹⁶ Goldman (1971) thinks of token actions as exemplifications of act-properties and denies that a single token action could exemplify a multitude of such properties. The point being made here does not assume that Goldman is wrong about the individuation of actions, but is easier to state if we speak about actions as coarse-grained events as Davidson (1980) does.

¹⁷ For further discussion of this point, see Stocker (1990: 272).

¹⁸ See Kenny (1975: 90) for further discussion.