Intentional Inaction, Blame, and Obligation:
A Case Study of "Ought Implies Can" Using Qualitative Methods
By Kyle Thompson, PhD
Adjunct Instructor of Philosophy and Writing, Harvey Mudd College

In recent years, experimental philosophers have used quantitative surveys to explore a number of folk concepts related to moral judgment, such as intentional action, blame, and obligation. At the intersection of a number of these concepts is "ought implies can" (OIC), a principle often attributed to Kant which holds that moral obligation applies only to actions that an agent can carry out.[1] Unsurprisingly, experimental philosophers have taken their survey methods to OIC, including a prominent and rigorous study by Chituc, Henne, Sinnott-Armstrong, and De Brigard (Chituc et al.) in which an agent's blameworthiness was varied to essentially stress test participants' judgments of "ought" as it applied to an action rendered impossible.[2] Specifically, Chituc et al. argue that folk judgments of "ought," which appeared swayed by an agent's blameworthiness, don't support that "ought" implies "can" based on the responses to two kinds of vignettes they administered: 1) scenarios in which agent was unintentionally unable to make a promised meeting (low blame), and 2) scenarios in which agent intentionally waited too long such that he was unable to make a promised meeting (high blame).[3] A number of other experimental studies and analyses in this literature support the contention that OIC isn't strongly upheld in folk cognition,[4, 5, 6, 7, 8] while others challenge this contention in one way or another.[9, 10, 11, 12, 13] This debate has sparked a fruitful discussion on folk concepts, OIC, and the challenges in capturing relevant folk judgments.

However, as with many studies in experimental philosophy (x-phi) which rely heavily or exclusively on quantitative methods, it is unclear whether the Chituc et al. study[14]—and the surrounding x-phi literature on OIC—provides clear evidence with which to evaluate participant usage of folk concepts. This results from an interpretive worry and a related methodological worry. The interpretive worry is whether participants' selections on quantitative surveys reflect their judgments—i.e., whether a given survey is valid—and it is exacerbated by the methodological worry that quantitative surveys are a blunt and inaccurate measuring device for getting at participants' judgments on concepts that are sought after precisely because they are messy and multifarious—i.e., OIC is debated in philosophy because it's complicated. To address these worries as they pertain to OIC in particular, as well as x-phi literature in general, I modified one of Chituc et al.'s experiments by adding a layer of qualitative data via both the think aloud method[15] and the qualitative interview.

Specifically, I had participants talk aloud as they completed surveys from Chituc et al. while I recorded their utterances; subsequently, I interviewed them about their experiences completing the surveys, again while recording. In this way, I could not only compare a given participant's quantitative selections to his or her qualitative utterances—thereby running a kind of validity check on the survey—but I could also capture any interesting contours of folk judgments regarding ability, intentional action or inaction, blame, and obligation. In total, I found that participants' judgments were significantly different than their quantitative selections indicated—interestingly, sometimes their utterances were the opposite of what their quantitative selections suggested. I also found that their judgments were overall more complicated, messy and multifarious than the quantitative surveys had implied. Conflicting with Chituc et al.'s results, participants in large part upheld or preserved OIC rather than violated it even when given ample opportunities to do so. Often times, while participants' quantitative results suggested a violation of OIC, their utterances, now given open-ended space for clarification and explanation, said otherwise.

For this workshop, I plan to present some of the more salient and interesting findings within my qualitative data—after a brief overview of my quantitative results—in order to argue that my results have a number of important implications for understanding folk concepts and their relation to debates in analytic philosophy. First, my study suggests that quantitative surveys alone are a poor guide to folk

judgments in OIC unless they can be designed to account for complex features of folk judgments that are difficult to appreciate without first employing qualitative methods. That is, I'll suggest experimental philosophers embrace a triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Second, I'll argue that it's probable that studies in x-phi outside of OIC, given the high prevalence of survey methods in x-phi generally, suffer from similar methodological limitations that present skewed interpretations of folk judgments. Again, this suggests the value of triangulation of methods in x-phi. Lastly, my study suggests that folk judgments relating to intentional action or inaction, blame, and obligation are far more complicated and multifarious than they are often treated in the x-phi literature on OIC. In particular, ascriptions of "ought" are sensitive to concreteness (temporal concreteness in particular), the perceived control an agent has over present and past actions, the role of moral residue, and more. To conclude I'll discuss the limitations of my own study and suggest what future research might explore.

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; original work published in 1787), 473.

[2] Vladimir Chituc et al., "Blame, Not Ability, Impacts Moral 'Ought' Judgments for Impossible Actions: Toward an Empirical Refutation of 'Ought' Implies 'Can,'" *Cognition* 150 (2016): 20-25, accessed June 5, 2017, doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2016.01.013.

[3] Chituc et al. used other kinds of vignettes too—e.g., some that didn't involve a promise to another person—but these are more peripheral to their study; they mostly function as a kind of control on the more interesting examples in which a promise is made then broken. To read all of their vignettes, see Chituc et al., "Blame, Not Ability" pages 21-22 and supplementary material from experiment 3 (available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2016.01.013). For their core conclusion that I paraphrase in the abstract above, see page 23 of their publication.

[4] The following is published by the same researchers as Chituc et al., and it details the same study: Paul Henne et al., "An Empirical Refutation of 'Ought' Implies 'Can,'" *Analysis* 76, no. 3 (2016): 283-290. doi: 10.1093/analys/anw041.

[5] Alicia Kissinger-Knox, Patrick Aragon, and Moti Mizrahi, "'Ought Implies Can,' Framing Effects, and 'Empirical Refutations,'" *Philosophia* 46, no. 1 (2018): 165-182.

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[12] Michael Hannon, "Intuitions, Reflective Judgments, and Experimental Philosophy," *Synthese* 195 (2018): 4150-4154, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1412-1.

[13] Yishai Cohen, "An Analysis of Recent Empirical Data on 'Ought' Implies 'Can,'" *Philosophia* 46, no .1 (2017): 57-67. doi: 10.1007/s11406-017-9892-2.

[14] Chituc et al. fall into the category of relying heavily, but not exclusively, on quantitative methods. For some of their experiments, they include a free-write space for participants to explain their quantitative responses, but the explanations are brief and play almost no role in Chituc et al.'s total analysis. See Chituc et al., "Blame, Not Ability," 21-22.

[15] I got the idea to use the think aloud method in my x-phi study from the following publication: James Andow, "Qualitative Tools and Experimental Philosophy," *Philosophical Psychology* 29, no. 8 (2016): 1130, accessed December 22, 2016, doi: 10.1080/09515089.2016.1224826.