

DETERMINISM,  
INDETERMINISM, AND  
LIBERTARIANISM



1. THE IMPLICATIONS OF OBLIGABILITY.

We often make retrospective judgments about the past actions of ourselves or other people which take the form: "You ought not to have done the action *X*, which you in fact did; you ought instead to have done the action *Y*, which in fact you did not". If I make such a judgment about a person, and he wants to refute it, he can take two different lines of argument. (i) He may say: "I could have done *Y* instead of *X*, but you are mistaken in thinking that *Y* was the action that I ought to have done. In point of fact, *X*, the action that I did, was the one that I ought to have done. If I had done *Y*, I should have done what I ought not to have done". (ii) He may say: "I could not help doing *X*", or he may

say: “Though I need not have done *X*, I could not possibly have done *Y*”.

If the accused person makes an answer of the first kind, he is admitting that the alternatives “ought” and “ought not” apply to the actions *X* and *Y*, but he is objecting to my applying “ought” to *Y* and “ought not” to *X*. He is saying that “ought” applies to *X*, and “ought not” to *Y*. It is as if two people, who agree that *X* and *Y* are each either black or white, should differ because one holds that *X* is black and *Y* white, whilst the other holds that *X* is white and *Y* black. If the accused person makes an answer of the second kind, he is denying the applicability of the alternatives “ought” and “ought not”. If he says: “I could not help doing *X*”, he assumes that his critic will admit that neither “ought” nor “ought not” has any application to an action which the agent could not help doing. If he says: “Though I need not have done *X*, yet I could not possibly have done *Y*”, he assumes that his critic will admit that neither “ought” nor “ought not” has any application to an action which the agent could not

have done. It is as if one person should say that *X* is black and *Y* is white, and the other should answer that at least one of them is unextended and therefore incapable of being either black or white.

**1·1. OBLIGABILITY ENTAILS SUBSTITUTABILITY.** Now we are concerned here only with the second kind of answer. The essential point to notice is that it is universally admitted to be a *relevant* answer. We all admit that there is some sense or other of “could” in which “ought” and “ought not” entail “could”. We will now try to get clear about the connexion between these two notions.

Judgments of obligation about past actions may be divided into two classes, viz., (1) judgments about actions which were actually done, and (2) judgments about conceivable actions which were not done. Each divides into two sub-classes, and so we get the following four-fold division. (1·1) “You did *X*, and *X* was the action that you ought to have done”. (1·2) “You did *X*, and *X* was an action that you ought not to have done”. (2·1) “You did not do *X*, and *X* was the action that you

ought to have done". And (2·2) "You did not do  $X$ , and  $X$  was an action that you ought not to have done". Now both judgments of the first class entail that you could have helped doing the action which you in fact did. If the action that you did can be said to be one that you ought to have done, or if it can be said to be one that you ought not to have done, it must be one that you *need not* have done. And, since you actually did it, it is obviously one that you *could have* done. Both judgments of the second class entail that you could have done an action which you did not in fact do. If a conceivable action which you did not do can be said to be one which you ought to have done, or if it can be said to be one that you ought not to have done, it must be one that you *could have* done. And, since you actually failed to do it, it is obviously one that you *need not* have done.

It is worth while to notice that the common phrases: "You ought to have done so and so" and "You ought not to have done so and so" are generally equivalent to our judgments (2·1) and (1·2) respectively. The former is

generally used to mean: “You did not do so and so, and that was an action which you ought to have done”. The latter is generally used to mean: “You did so and so, and that was an action which you ought not to have done”. But we often need to express what is expressed by our judgments (1·1) and (2·2). We often want to say that a person did what he ought on a certain occasion, and we often want to say that a person avoided doing something which he ought not to have done on a certain occasion. For this is exactly the state of affairs which exists when a person has in fact done an unpleasant duty in face of a strong temptation to shirk it by lying.

Now the importance of this connexion between “ought” and “ought not”, on the one hand, and “could”, on the other, is very great. People constantly make judgments of obligation of the four kinds which we have distinguished, and such judgments have constantly been made throughout the whole course of human history. Every single one of these judgments has been false unless there have been cases in which actions which *were* done

could have been left undone and actions which *were not* done could have been done. And these judgments would all have been false in principle, and not merely in detail. They would have been false, not in the sense that they asserted “ought” where they should have asserted “ought not”, or *vice versa*. They would be false in the sense that nothing in the world has ever had that determinable characteristic of which “ought to be done” and “ought not to be done” are the determinate specifications. They would be false in the sense in which all judgments which predicated redness, blueness, etc., of any object would be false in a world which contained no objects except minds and noises.

It will be convenient to call an action “obligable” if and only if it is an action of which “ought to be done” or “ought not to be done” can be predicated. It will be convenient to call an action “substitutable” if, either it was done but could have been left undone, or it was left undone but could have been done. We may then sum up the situation by saying that an action is obligable if and only if it is, in

a certain sense, substitutable; that, unless all judgments of obligation are false in principle, there are obligable actions; and therefore, unless all judgments of obligation are false in principle, there are actions which are, in this sense, substitutable.

1.2. VARIOUS SENSES OF “SUBSTITUTABLE”. This is one aspect of the case. The other aspect is the following. There are several senses of “could” in which nearly everyone would admit that some actions which were done could have been left undone, and some actions which were left undone could have been done. There are thus several senses of “substitutable” in which it would commonly be admitted that some actions are substitutable. But, although an action which was *not* substitutable in these senses would *not* be obligable, it seems doubtful whether an action which was substitutable *only* in these senses *would be* obligable. It seems doubtful whether an action would be obligable unless it were substitutable in some further sense.

At this stage two difficulties arise. (i) It is extremely difficult to grasp and to express

clearly this further sense of “substitutable”, i.e., this further sense of “could” in which an action that was done could have been left undone or an action which was not done could have been done. Many people would say that they can attach no meaning to “substitutable” except those meanings in which it is insufficient to make an action obligable. (ii) Even if this other meaning of “substitutable” can be grasped and clearly expressed, many people would say that no action is substitutable in this sense. They would claim to see that no action which has been done could have been left undone, and that no action which was not done could have been done, in that sense of “could” which is required if an action is to be obligable.

Now anyone who holds these views is in a very awkward position. On the one hand, it is not easy to believe that every judgment of obligation is false, in the sense in which every judgment ascribing colour to an object would be false in a world containing only minds and noises. On the other hand, it is highly depressing to have to admit that there is a sense



of “could” which you can neither grasp nor clearly express. And it is equally unsatisfactory to have to believe that some actions *are* substitutable in a sense in which it seems to you self-evident that no action *could be* substitutable.

There are two problems to be tackled at this point. (i) To try to discover and state the sense of “substitutable” in which being substitutable is the necessary and sufficient condition of being obligable. And (ii), if we can do this, to consider whether any action could be substitutable in this sense.

**1·21. VOLUNTARY SUBSTITUTABILITY.** Let us begin by considering an action which has actually been performed. In some cases we should say that the agent “could not have helped” performing it. We should certainly say this if we had reason to believe that the very same act would have been performed by the agent in these circumstances even though he had willed that it should not take place. It is obvious that there are actions which are “inevitable”, in this sense, since there are actions which take place although the agent is trying his hardest to prevent them. Cf., e.g.,

the case of a conspirator taken with an uncontrollable fit of sneezing.

Next consider a conceivable action which was not in fact performed. In some cases we should say that the agent “could not possibly” have performed it. We should certainly say this if the act would not have taken place in these circumstances no matter how strongly the agent had willed it. It is obvious that there are conceivable acts which are “impossible” in this sense, since there are cases where such an act fails to take place although the agent is trying his hardest to bring it about. Cf., e.g., the case of a man who is bound and gagged, and tries vainly to give warning to a friend.

We will call acts of these two kinds “not voluntarily substitutable”. It is plain that an act which is not voluntarily substitutable is not obligable. No one would say that the conspirator ought not to have sneezed, or that the bound and gagged man ought to have warned his friend. At most we may be able to say that they ought or ought not to have done certain things in the past which are relevant to their present situation. Perhaps the conspirator