# It Is Impossible to Be Able to Do the Impossible

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### Abstract

Jack Spencer has recently argued that somebody might be able to do the impossible. In response, Anthony Nguyen has argued against Spencer's arguments. In this paper, I do not argue against Spencer's arguments. Instead, I argue directly against Spencer's thesis. In the first part of my paper, I develop an argument that suggests that it is *implausible* that somebody is able to do the impossible (because somebody who is able to do the impossible would be able to do something that would have incredible consequences). In the second part of my paper, I develop an argument that suggests that it is *impossible* that somebody is able to do the impossible (because somebody who is able to do the impossible would have inconsistent obligations). In the third part of my paper, I discuss and reject three objections to my arguments. I conclude that there are good reasons to believe that it is impossible that somebody is able to do the impossible.

*Keywords*: Metaphysics, Philosophy of action, Ability, Possibility, Counterfactual logic.

## 1. Introduction

Jack Spencer (2017) has recently argued that somebody might be able to do the impossible.[1] His arguments consist, to a large extent, in describing a class of cases

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[1] As Spencer makes clear, when he speaks of 'being able to do the impossible' he always means 'being able to do the *metaphysically* impossible' (see e.g. 2017: 465). Spencer suggests that somebody is *in fact* able to do the impossible (not only that it is *metaphysically possible* that somebody is able to do the impossible). At the end of his paper, he goes so far to conclude that "[y]ou and I and others like us literally are able to do the impossible" (2017: 494). The aim of this paper is to argue, contrary to Spencer, that it is *metaphysically impossible* that somebody is able to do the impossible (from which it follows, of course, that *nobody is in fact* able to do the impossible).

—G-cases, as he calls them—in which it is intuitively plausible to hold that somebody is able to do something impossible.[2] Here is one of Spencer's G-cases:

> *Simple G*: Suppose that determinism is true. Let h be the complete specification of the initial conditions of the universe. Let 1 be the complete specification of the deterministic laws of nature. Let h ∧ 1 be their conjunction. Suppose that G has not, does not, and will not believe that h ∧ 1. G never finds herself reading a book or listening to a radio programme about the initial conditions or the laws of nature; G was home from school and sick with the flu on the day that her physics teacher covered the initial conditions and the laws of nature in class, and the physics teacher never bothered to go over the material again. We may suppose that it is fairly common knowledge in G's community that h ∧ 1, that matriculating high school seniors are expected to know that h ∧ 1, that many of G's classmates know that h ∧ 1, and that G is one of the brightest students in her class. The proposition that h ∧ 1 does not exceed G's cognitive wherewithal, either in length or in complexity, and there are no special obstacles preventing G from forming the belief (Spencer 2017: 468).

It is impossible that G knows that h ∧ 1. For it is, on the one hand, impossible that G knows that h ∧ 1 and that it is *not true* that h ∧ 1 (given that it is impossible to know something false) and it is, on the other hand, impossible that G knows that h ∧ 1 and that it is *true* that h ∧ 1 (given that, because of the fact that G does not know h ∧ 1 and because of determinism, h ∧ 1 *entails* that G does not know h ∧ 1). Thus, it is impossible that G knows that h ∧ 1. However, according to Spencer, G is *able* to know that h ∧ 1. Spencer concludes that somebody might be able to do the impossible.

Here is another of Spencer's G-cases:

> I know that the actual world is actual, as do you. But not everyone knows that the actual world is actual; many have never even considered the matter. The question arises, then, whether an agent might have the unexercised ability to know that the actual world is actual. And I think so:
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> *Actual G*: G is an actual person, a competent college student, who, as a matter of fact, will never come to believe that the actual world is actual.
>
> I think that G, in *Actual G*, like most college students, has the unexercised (and therefore necessarily unexercised) ability to know that the actual world is actual. (Spencer 2017: 479).

Again, it is impossible that G knows that the actual world is actual. For it is, on the one hand, impossible that G knows that the actual world is actual and that it is *not true* that the actual world is actual (given that it is impossible to know something false) and it is, on the other hand, impossible that G knows that the actual world is actual and that it is *true* that the actual world is actual (because the fact that the actual world is actual *entails* that G does not know that the actual world is actual). Thus, it is impossible that G knows that the actual world is actual. However,

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[2] Spencer 2017: 467-69; 477-81. In Spencer's view, G-cases are necessary but not sufficient for Spencer's argument. He explains: "G-cases are only a part of my argument. The other part is a non-standard proposal about the relationship between abilities and metaphysical possibilities, and the argument gathers force only when the two parts act in tandem" (2017: 469).

according to Spencer, G is *able* to know that the actual world is actual. Therefore, according to Spencer, somebody might able to do the impossible.

Spencer's views are gaining a lot of attention in the literature.[3] In fact, Anthony Nguyen has argued against Spencer's arguments.[4] In this paper, I do not argue against Spencer's arguments. Instead, I argue directly against Spencer's thesis.[5] In the first part of my paper, I develop an argument that suggests that it is *implausible* that somebody is able to do the impossible. The general idea is that, if one's doing something is impossible, then one's doing it would have incredible consequences. It is, however, implausible that somebody is able to do something that would have incredible consequences. In the second part of my paper, I develop an argument that suggests that it is *impossible* that somebody is able to do the impossible. The general idea is that whether one ought to do something depends, among other things, on what one's doing it would amount to. However, if it is impossible that one does it, then one's doing it would amount to something incredibly good (such that it is true that one ought to do it) as well as to something incredibly bad (such that it is not true that one ought to do it). Thus, if somebody is able to do something impossible then it is true and not true that one ought to do it (which is impossible). In the third part of my paper, I discuss and reject three objections to my arguments. I conclude that there are good reasons to believe that it is impossible that somebody is able to do the impossible.

## 2. The Argument from Incredible Consequences

Suppose your friend is able to do something that, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a paradise. What would you answer if your friend asked you whether he *ought* to do it? I guess the answer suggests itself. Of course, he ought to do it.

Suppose, however, that your friend is able to do something that would violate everybody's rights, would harm everybody and, without anybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a hell. What would you answer if your friend asked you whether he *ought* to do it? I guess the answer suggests itself. Of course not.

Let us take a step back. Suppose your friend *tells* you that he is able to do something that, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a paradise. Would you believe him? I guess the answer suggests itself. Of course not.

Jack Spencer has recently argued, however, that somebody is able to do something even though it is impossible that he or she does it. In my view, Spencer's thesis is implausible. For it is not difficult to see that Spencer's thesis amounts to the incredible thesis that somebody is *in fact* able to do something that,

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[3] The consequences of Spencer's views are discussed in metaphysics (see e.g. Vetter & Busse 2022: 85), epistemology (see e.g. Heylen 2020) and philosophy of action (see e.g. Hausmann 2020: 64-65).

[4] Nguyen 2020. Besides critically examining Spencer's arguments (2020: 589-601), Nguyen argues that Spencer's "thesis carries substantial theoretical costs with it" (2020: 585).

[5] In his paper, Spencer not only argues for the thesis "that an agent might be able to do what it is metaphysically impossible for her to do" (2017: 465). He also argues for the thesis "that an agent might be able to do what it is metaphysically impossible to do *tout court*" (2017: 465). At the face of it, I only argue against the former thesis. However, given that the latter thesis entails the former thesis, I also argue against the latter thesis.

without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a paradise.

In arguing against Spencer's thesis, I rely on very weak logical assumptions. I assume that '□ p' is an abbreviation for 'it is necessarily true that p', I assume that '◊ p' is an abbreviation for 'it is possibly true that p' and I assume that the following equivalence holds between possibility and necessity (see, for example, Garson 2013: 20):

(EQ) ⊢ ◊ p ↔ ~ □ ~ p

I assume, further, that the following axioms for necessity hold (which correspond to the weakest normal modal logic K; see, for example, Garson 2013: 30):

(K) ⊢ □ (p → q) → (□ p → □ q)
(RN) If ⊢ p then ⊢ □ p

Note that, given these very weak logical assumptions, anything follows from an impossibility:

(IMP) ~ ◊ p → □ (p → q)

For suppose that it is impossible that p but *not* necessarily true that if p then q:

(1) ~ ◊ p                                                        assumption
(2) ~ □ (p → q)                                            assumption

If it is not necessarily true that if p then q, then it is possibly true that p:

(3) ◊ (p & ~ q)                                             (2), (EQ), (K), (RN)
(4) ◊ p                                                            (3), (EQ), (K), (RN)

Thus, the assumption that it is impossible that p but *not* necessarily true that if p then q leads to a contradiction:

(5) ◊ p & ~ ◊ p                                                          (1), (4)

Hence, anything follows from an impossibility:

(IMP) ~ ◊ p → □ (p → q)

Finally, I assume that 'p □→ q' is an abbreviation for 'if it were the case that p, then it would be the case that q' and I assume that necessary implication entails counterfactual implication:[6]

(NEC) ⊢ □ (p → q) → (p □→ q)

Let us say, for the sake of readability, that something is *incredibly constructive* just in case that it turns life on earth into a paradise, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent. In my view, Spencer's thesis that somebody is able to do the impossible is implausible because it amounts to the incredible thesis that somebody is able to do something that would be *incredibly constructive*. To see this, suppose that somebody is able to do something even though it is impossible that he or she does it:

(1) ∃x ∃y (x is able to do y & ~ ◊ x does y)            assumption

As we have already seen, anything follows from an impossibility. It is, therefore, necessarily true that, if he or she does it, it is incredibly constructive:

(2) □ (x does y → y is incredibly constructive)          (1), (IMP)

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[6] See, for example, Stalnaker 1968: 106 and Williamson 2007: 156. This assumption will be discussed below.

This yields the result that, if he or she did it, it *would* be incredibly constructive:

    (3) x does y □→ y is incredibly constructive         (2), (NEC)

It follows that somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive:

    (4) ∃x ∃y (x is able to do y & (x does y □→ y is incredibly constructive))
                                        (1)-(3)

Thus, Spencer's thesis amounts to the thesis that somebody is able to do something that, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a paradise. Here, then, is my first argument against Spencer's thesis: It is obvious that *nobody* is able to do something that, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a paradise. I conclude that Spencer's thesis is false.

## 3. The Argument from Inconsistent Obligations

In my view, it is not only *implausible*, it is *impossible* that somebody is able to do the impossible. To see this, recall that if somebody is able to do something that, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a paradise, then he or she *ought* to do it:

    (1) ∀x ∀y ((x is able to do y & (x does y □→ y is incredibly constructive)) → x
        ought to do y)                              premise

Recall, further, that if somebody is able to do something that, without anybody's consent, would violate everybody's rights, would harm everybody and would turn life on earth into a hell, then it is *not true* that he or she ought to do it (let us say, for the sake of readability, that something is *incredibly destructive* just in case that it violates everybody's rights, harms everybody and, without anybody's consent, turns life on earth into a hell):

    (2) ∀x ∀y ((x is able to do y & (x does y □→ y is incredibly destructive)) → ~
        x ought to do y)                           premise

Suppose, however, that somebody is able to do something even though it is impossible that he or she does it:

    (3) ∃x ∃y (x is able to do y & ~ ◊ x does y)         assumption

By parallel reasoning as above, that person is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive:

    (4) x is able to do y & (x does y □→ y is incredibly constructive)
                                    (3), (IMP), (NEC)

Likewise, by parallel reasoning as above, that person is able to do something that would be incredibly destructive:

    (5) x is able to do y & (x does y □→ y is incredibly destructive)
                                    (3), (IMP), (NEC)

However, if somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive then he or she ought to do it. And if somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly destructive then *it is not true* that he or she ought to do it. Thus, it is true and not true that he or she ought to do it:

    (6) x ought to do y & ~ x ought to do y         (1), (2), (4), (5)

The assumption that somebody is able to do the impossible, therefore, leads to a contradiction. Here, then, is my second argument against Spencer's thesis: If somebody is able to do the impossible, it is true and not true that he or she ought to do it. I conclude that Spencer's thesis is false.[7]

It is not difficult to see how one might extend my argument, in order to show that Spencer's thesis is not only false, but *necessarily* false. For one might have doubts about whether it is *necessarily* true that if somebody is able to do something that, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a paradise, then he or she *ought* to do it. After all, it appears to be *possibly* true that life on earth *already is* a paradise. However, it nonetheless appears to be *necessarily* true that there are *at least some* (constructive) conditions such that, if somebody is able to do something that would have the consequence that these (constructive) conditions obtain, then he or she ought to do it:

(1) □ ∃p ∀x ∀y ((x is able to do y & (x does y □→ y has the consequence that p)) → x ought to do y)                              premise

Perhaps (though in my view less likely), one might also have doubts about whether it is *necessarily* true that if somebody is able to do something that would violate everybody's rights, would harm everybody and, without anybody's consent, would turn life on earth into a hell, then it is *not true* that he or she ought to do it. However, it nonetheless appears to be *necessarily* true that there are *at least some* (destructive) conditions such that, if somebody is able to do something that would have the consequence that these (destructive) conditions obtain, then it is *not true* that he or she ought to do it:

(2) □ ∃p ∀x ∀y ((x is able to do y & (x does y □→ y has the consequence that p)) → ~ x ought to do y)                          premise

Suppose, however, that it is *possible* that somebody is able to do something even though it is impossible that he or she does it:

(3) ◊ ∃x ∃y (x is able to do y & ~ ◊ x does y)              assumption

It follows, by parallel reasoning as above, that it is possible that it is true and not true that he or she ought to do it:

(4) ◊ (x ought to do y & ~ x ought to do y)
                                        (1), (2), (3), (EQ), (K), (IMP), (NEC)

It is, however, impossible that it is true and not true that he or she ought to do it:

(5) ~ ◊ (x ought to do y & ~ x ought to do y)              (EQ), (RN)

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[7] It is not mandatory to interpret the argument from inconsistent obligations in terms of moral obligations. Williams (1965: 123-24), for example, distinguishes between moral and deliberative obligations. According to Williams, it is a mistake to identify "the 'ought' that occurs in […] moral judgements […] with the 'ought' that occurs in the deliberative question 'what ought I to do?' and in answers to this question given by myself and others" (1965: 123). In his view, when we know that we very much like not to do what we morally ought to do "the deliberative question can be worth asking and [we] can, moreover intelligibly arrive at a decision, or receive advice, in answer to it that is offensive to morality" (1965: 123). In my view, one might as well interpret the argument from inconsistent obligations in terms of deliberative obligations. It is not mandatory to interpret it in terms of moral obligations.

Thus, the assumption that it is *possible* that somebody is able to do the impossible leads to a contradiction. I conclude that it is not only *implausible* but also *impossible* that somebody is able to do the impossible.

This additional argument helps to make clear that one can accept my argument quite independently of one's ethical (or metaethical) views. There is no need to enter into ethical (or metaethical) debates. For as long as one grants that there are *some* constructive conditions under which it is the case that one ought to do it as well as *some* destructive conditions under which it is *not* the case that one ought to do it, one can always construct an argument parallel to the argument above by referring to these conditions (instead of the conditions specified above) and, by doing so, still get to the conclusion that it is impossible to be able to do the impossible. One can, therefore, accept my argument quite independently of one's ethical (or metaethical) views.

## 4. Objections and Replies

In what follows, I discuss three objections to my arguments. To begin with, one might question the premise of my second argument that it is *impossible* to have inconsistent obligations. After all, there are much discussed examples in the literature that purport to show that it is *possible* to have inconsistent obligations. Here is one such example:

> For example, I ought to protect my children from harm, and I ought not to harbor a criminal, but if my child breaks the law and I am in a position to hide him so that he escapes punishment, then it seems I ought to turn him in because he is a criminal […], and I ought not to turn him in to protect him from harm […] (Garson 2013: 48).[8]

It goes without saying that these examples are controversial (see, for example, Conee 1985). Be that as it may, this objection rests on a misunderstanding. For my assumption that it is impossible to have inconsistent obligations is not the controversial assumption that it is impossible that something is such that somebody *ought to do* and *ought not to do* it, but only the uncontroversial assumption that it is impossible that something is such that *it is true and not true* that somebody ought to do it. The latter assumption is, unlike the former assumption, uncontroversial because to reject the latter assumption means to reject the assumption that contradictions are not possibly true.[9]

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[8] Garson's view is that "conflicts of obligation are possible" but that conflicts of obligation arise "because *conflicting systems* of obligation pull us in different directions" (2013: 48). For further discussion see, for example, Williams 1965, Marcus 1980 and Conee 1985.

[9] Spencer, of course, does *not* reject the assumption that contradictions are not possibly true. See, for example, Spencer 2017: 489. A qualification: Throughout my argument, I assume that one can meaningfully assign truth-values to statements such as 'x ought to do y'. Spencer appears to agree (see Spencer 2017: 487). There might, however, be non-cognitivists that would reject this assumption and that would, therefore, reject the meaningfulness of the assumption that it is impossible that something is such that *it is true and not true* that somebody ought to do it. Obviously, this is not the place to discuss non-cognitivism. All that can be said is that everybody who does not subscribe to non-cognitivism has good reasons to reject the view that somebody is able to do the impossible. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

Second, one might question the logical assumptions of my arguments. In particular, one might question the assumption that necessary implication entails counterfactual implication. After all, if *anything* is necessary implied by an impossibility then, if necessary implication entails counterfactual implication, *anything* is counterfactually implied by an impossibility. There are, however, reasons to doubt that anything is counterfactually implied by an impossibility. There are much discussed examples in the literature that purport to show that *not anything* is counterfactually implied by an impossibility. Here are two such examples:[10]

(1) If Hobbes had (secretly) squared the circle, all sick children in the mountains of South America at that time would have cared.
(2) If intuitionistic logic were the correct logic, then the law of excluded middle would still be valid.

In my view, there are two reasons why this objection is not a serious problem for my argument. First, the assumption that anything is counterfactually implied by an impossibility (as well as the assumption that necessary implication entails counterfactual implication) has not only been extensively defended,[11] it is a theorem of standard axiomatic systems for counterfactuals (such as Stalnaker's, Lewis's, Williamson's or Leitgeb's).[12] Thus, insofar as these axiomatic systems are sound and complete with respect to plausible semantics for counterfactuals,[13] this assumption appears to be justified—at least, at the face of it.

Second, slightly different arguments are available *without* the assumption that necessary implication entails counterfactual implication—arguments that still have enough intuitive appeal to make a compelling case against Spencer's thesis. To see this, suppose that your friend *tells* you that he is able to do something that has the *necessary consequence* that it turns, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, life on earth into a paradise. Would you believe him? I guess not. Suppose, further, that your friend is able to do something that has the *necessary consequence* that it turns, without violating anybody's rights, without doing harm to anybody and with everybody's consent, life on earth into a paradise. Ought he to do it? Of course, he ought to do it. Suppose, however, that your friend is able to do something that has the *necessary consequence* that it violates everybody's rights, harms everybody and, without anybody's consent, turns life on earth into a hell. Ought he to do it? Of course not. I take it, therefore, that slightly different arguments are available without the assumption that necessary implication entails counterfactual implication—arguments that are still intuitively plausible enough to make a strong case against Spencer's thesis.

This brings me to the third objection. One might reject the premise of my second argument that, if somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive, then he or she ought to do it. One might try to argue against this assumption on the grounds that, if somebody is able to do something that would

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[10] See, for example, Nolan 1997: 544, Brogaard & Salerno 2013: 642-43 and Berto, French, Priest and Ripley 2018: 696.
[11] See Lewis 1973: 24-25, Williamson 2007: 171-75 and Williamson 2018.
[12] See Stalnaker 1968: 105-106, Lewis 1973: 132, Williamson 2007: 293, Leitgeb 2012a: 54-55.
[13] See, for example, a possible worlds semantics for counterfactuals, as developed by Stalnaker (1968) or Lewis (1973), or a probabilistic semantics for counterfactuals, as developed by Leitgeb (2012a, 2012b).

be incredibly constructive, then he or she ought to do it *only if it is false that it would also be incredibly destructive*. One might argue as follows: If somebody is able to do something impossible, then it would not only be incredibly constructive, it would also be incredibly destructive (given that anything is counterfactually implied by an impossibility). It follows that, if somebody is able to do something impossible, then *it is false* that he or she ought to do it. It follows, further, that if somebody is able to do something impossible, then, *even if it would be incredibly constructive*, it is false that he or she ought to do it. There is, however, somebody who *is* able to do something impossible. There is, therefore, somebody who is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive, even though it is false that he or she ought to do it. Therefore, so the objection goes, one of the premises of my second argument is false.[14]

I guess it is obvious why this objection is problematic. This objection is problematic because it *presupposes* Spencer's thesis (it presupposes that somebody is able to do something impossible). It has no force whatsoever for those who are *not* adherents of Spencer's thesis.[15]

In my view, however, there is a further reason why this objection is problematic. For this objection has the consequence that, necessarily, if somebody is able to do something impossible, then it is false that he or she ought to do it. This, however, is at odds with Spencer's views on the matter and threatens to undermine Spencer's arguments. For Spencer's arguments consist, to a large extend, in describing G-cases. Spencer shows, however, that if G-cases are genuine cases of

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[14] It is not difficult to see how one might extend this objection such as to apply to my extended second argument. For it appears to be *necessarily* true that there are *at least some* (destructive) conditions such that somebody ought to do something *only if it is false that it would have the consequence that these (destructive) conditions obtain*. It is *necessarily* true, however, that if somebody is able to do something impossible, then *it would have, as a consequence, any condition whatsoever* (given that anything is counterfactually entailed by an impossibility). It is, therefore, *necessarily* true that if somebody is able to do something impossible, then it is false that he or she ought to do it. It is, however, *possible* that somebody is able to do something impossible. It is, therefore, *possible* that somebody is able to do something that would have, as a consequence, *any* condition whatsoever, *and that it would still be false that* he or she ought to do it. It is, therefore, *possible* that *no* (constructive) condition is such that, if somebody is able to do something that would have the consequence that this (constructive) condition obtains, then he or she ought to do it. Therefore, so the objection goes, one of the premises of my extended second argument is false.

[15] To be sure, this objection is *not* problematic because it rests on the assumption that, if somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive, then he or she ought to do it *only if it is false that it would also be incredibly destructive*. In fact, I do *not* reject this highly plausible assumption. Quite the contrary. I am committed to this assumption. For, in my view, this assumption is not only *compatible with* the premises of my argument, it *is entailed by* the premises of my argument. To see this, note that it is entailed by the premises of my argument that nobody is able to do the impossible and that, if somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive, then he or she ought to do it. However, if nobody is able to do the impossible, then nobody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive and that would also be incredibly destructive. It follows that if somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive, then he or she ought to do it and *it is false that* it would also be incredibly destructive. Thus, it is entailed by the premises of my argument that, if somebody is able to do something that would be incredibly constructive, then he or she ought to do it *only if it is false that it would also be incredibly destructive*.

somebody who is able to do something impossible, then some G-cases are also genuine cases of somebody who is able *and ought* to do something impossible (Spencer 2017: 486-88). Thus, insofar as somebody has reasons to accept G-cases (that is, reasons to believe that G-cases are *possible*), one has also reasons to accept the thesis that it is *possible* that somebody is able *and ought* to do something impossible. This objection, however, has the consequence that it is *impossible* that somebody is able *and ought* to do something impossible. Thus, this objection contradicts Spencer's own views about the matter and, what is worse, threatens to undermine Spencer's arguments.

## 5. Conclusion

Jack Spencer has recently argued that somebody might be able to do the impossible. As we have seen, there are good reasons to believe that it is *implausible* that somebody is able to do the impossible (because somebody who is able to do the impossible would be able to do something that would have incredible consequences). As we have also seen, there are good reasons to believe that it is *impossible* that somebody is able to do the impossible (because somebody who is able to do the impossible would have inconsistent obligations). I conclude that there are good reasons to believe that it is impossible that somebody is able to do the impossible.[16]

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