

## The Ethical Basis of Root Modality: A Case for an "Ethical" Modality

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/6796332>

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出版情報：言語科学. 31, pp.39-65, 1996-02-26. The Institute of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University

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THE ETHICAL BASIS OF ROOT MODALITY  
—A CASE FOR AN "ETHICAL" MODALITY—

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FUMIO MIYAHARA

Abstract

The meanings of obligation, permission, volition, and ability are the four terms of root modality, and they constitute a well-defined semantic system. The reason for this is that they are hierarchically related by implication, which holds not only between two adjacent terms (in such a way as: obligation implies permission; permission implies volition; volition implies ability), but also between two non-adjacent terms (in such a way as: obligation implies volition; obligation implies ability; permission implies ability). These implication relationships are well established in ethics, with obligation and permission forming the two higher terms, and volition and ability the two lower terms. Volition and ability are thus two basic terms of ethics, and therefore belong with obligation and permission. One consequence of this insight is that we should not separate volition and ability from obligation and permission; in particular, we should not set up a new category such as "dynamic modality" in order to accommodate them. Because the four terms are the essential components of ethics, root modality can be characterized as a modality of "ethics," or "ethical modality," and this will ensure a better understanding of the nature and use of this modality.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Root Modality and its Four Terms

Root modality in English is one of the two sets of functions performed by a system of auxiliary verbs MUST, SHALL, OUGHT, MAY, WILL, and CAN. These verbs are auxiliary in that they are always finite, having no infinitive or participle forms, and that they cannot form a predicate verb by themselves, because they always require an infinitive (either the root or the to-infinitive) after them. Semantically this category consists of the meanings of 'obligation' (expressed by MUST, OUGHT, and SHALL), 'permission' (expressed by MAY), 'volition' (expressed by WILL), and 'ability' (expressed by CAN). The same set of auxiliary verbs has a different set of functions, and this is generally called epistemic modality, which comprises the meanings of logical certainty (expressed by MUST, OUGHT and SHALL), probability (expressed by WILL), and possibility (expressed by MAY and CAN).

The four terms of root modality are sometimes called 'necessity,' 'permission,' 'inclination,' and 'ability' (Halliday, 1970), but I prefer to call them 'obligation', 'permission', 'volition', and 'ability' (Miyahara, 1981 & 1984), the reason for which will become clear from the discussions in the following sections.

### 1.2. Implication Relationships between the Adjacent Terms

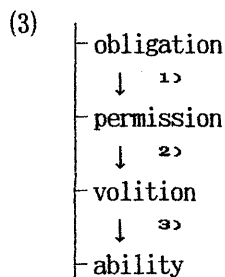
It has been noted that there are certain implication relationships between terms of root modality. (Lyons, 1977: 837ff, for example.) One detailed discussion of these relationships is seen in Miyahara (1984). It is claimed there that there is a direct implication relationship between obligation and permission, between permission and volition, and between volition and ability. This is formulated as in (1):

- (1) obligation  $\sim$  permission; permission  $\sim$  volition; volition  $\sim$  ability (The symbol  $\sim$  means "implies.")

These relationships can be collapsed into one straight chain of implication as in (2):

- (2) obligation  $\sim$  permission  $\sim$  volition  $\sim$  ability

This straight chain of implication relationships can be represented as a scale of force, or potency, of modality as in (3):

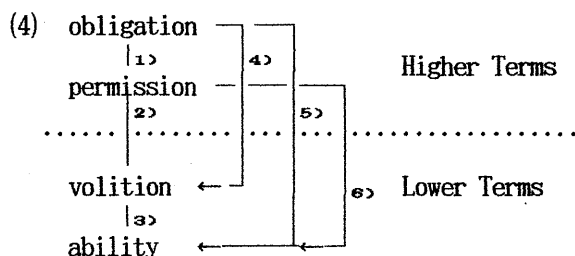


(Miyahara, 1984: 346.)

These are the relationships between the adjacent terms of root modality. They alone would be a good enough reason for establishing the four terms as a well-defined grammatical system. However, in addition to these, implication relationships also hold between the non-adjacent terms. These relationships even more strengthen the status of the four terms as forming a self-contained grammatical category, and reveal the nature of root modality even more clearly.

### 1.3. Implication Relationships between the Non-Adjacent Terms

The implication relationships between the non-adjacent terms are those between 'obligation' and 'volition', 'obligation' and 'ability', and 'permission' and 'ability.' They can be shown as 4) - 6) in the diagram in (4).



They are the relationships between the two higher terms (obligation and permission) and the two lower terms (volition and ability). In other words, I am concerned with the status of the two lower terms in relation to the two higher terms. In my view, obligation implies volition (as indicated by 4)), and ability (as indicated by 5)), and permission implies ability (as indicated by 6)). These additional implication relationships collaborate with those between the adjacent terms, and support my thesis that root modality consists of these four terms.

In the below, section 2 will establish the implication relationship in 4),

section 3 the implication in 5), and section 4 the implication in 6).

## **2. Obligation Implies Volition**

### **2.1. Obligation, Volition, and Will**

Before discussing how obligation is related to volition, we should be clear about the difference between "volition" and "will." We must understand that "will" is the power to choose one act or another while "volition" is the act of exercising will. Will is thus at the basis of volition.

### **2.2. Obligation Implies Will**

#### **2.2.1. Obligation Presupposes Free Will**

There is always the question of will at the basis of obligation. When we say that a person has an obligation to do an act, we assume that he may or may not do it. He can choose between two courses of action—to do the act or not to do it. This is because he has a free will.

Therefore, when we say that a person has the obligation to do an act, we assume that he has a free will.

#### **2.2.2. Support from Ethics**

##### **2.2.2.1. Views on Free Will in Ethics**

It is generally agreed upon in ethics that we cannot speak of obligation and other matters of ethics if the person in question is not a man of free will. This view is found in Immanuel Kant as well as in modern scholars of ethics.

##### **2.2.2.2. Immanuel Kant**

Immanuel Kant's most explicit pronouncement of the freedom of will is probably the following:

*"The autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws, and of all duties which conform to them ..." (Kant, 1788: 145 in the original; 122 in the tr.) (Italics mine.)*

The autonomy of the will is the freedom of the will, and its existence is presupposed in discussions of duties and other ethical matters. This statement by Kant, however, is no more than a recapitulation of his earlier statements. In the preface to Kant (1785), he says that moral philosophy determines the laws of the human will while natural philosophy determines the laws of nature.

"Natural and moral philosophy ... can each have their empirical

part, since the former has to determine the laws of nature as an object of experience; the latter the laws of the *human will*, so it is affected by nature: the former, however, being laws according to which everything ought to happen. Ethics, however, must also consider the conditions under which *what ought to happen frequently does not.*" (Kant, 1785: 4 in the original; 1-2 in the tr.) (Italics mine.)

Here the human will is defined as a faculty of determining oneself to action:

"The will is considered as a *faculty of determining oneself to action* in accordance with the conception of certain laws. And such a faculty can be found only in rational beings." (Kant, 1785: 55 in the original; 45 in the tr. Italics mine.)

#### 2.2.2.3. Modern Scholars of Ethics

Kant's view in the above is echoed by modern scholars of ethics.

Sahakian (1974), for instance, explains Kant's moral philosophy as follows:

"Kantian ethical theory is founded upon the concept of *good will*, and whatever is extraneous to will falls outside the domain of morality. ... Moral obligation can be only that which a man can effect by will; what lies beyond one's will falls outside the domain of moral responsibility." (Sahakian, 1974: 106)

Nowell-Smith (1954) says:

"A man is not considered blameworthy if he could not have acted otherwise." (Nowell-Smith, 1954: 274)

Where there is no freedom of will, there is no question of obligation.

The same view is given by Mayo (1958):

"When a person 'can't help' doing something, then it makes no sense to say that he ought not to do it and it would be wrong to blame him for doing it...." (Mayo, 1958: 221)

An explicit mention of "free will" in relation to moral responsibility is found in Ayer (1954).

"When I am said to have done something of my own *free will*, it is implied that I could have acted otherwise; and it is only when it is believed that I could have acted otherwise that I am held to be morally responsible for what I have done. For a man is not thought to be morally responsible for an action that it was not in his power to avoid." (Ayer, 1954: 271) (Italics mine.)

In order to be morally responsible and capable of bearing obligation, a man

must be a man of free will. In this sense, obligation presupposes, and therefore implies, the existence of will with its freedom and autonomy.

### 2.2.3. Obligation vs. Compulsion

#### 2.2.3.1. Obligation is Not Compulsion

As obligation presupposes the existence of free will, obligation and free will are not contradictory with each other. When we impose an obligation upon a person, we are not rejecting his will. We are simply demanding that he decide to do the act of *his own will*. Obligation does not consist in a rejection of will.

Compulsion, on the other hand, consists in the rejection of free will. It deprives the person of free will and compels him to do a prescribed act. As it is not based on a man's free will, it is not a matter of ethics or deontology. It is expressed in English by HAVE TO, which is not a modal auxiliary, while obligation is expressed by the modals MUST, OUGHT, and SHALL.

When we speak of obligation of a person, we demand that he decide to do the act of his own will. When he decides to do it, he has his own motive to do it, and this is not compulsion, as Nowell-Smith (1954) says,

"one's own motive can be said to 'obligate' one." (Nowell-Smith, 1954: 204.)

#### 2.2.3.2. Some Examples

When a mother says to her son:

(6) You *must* wait until the doctor comes.

she is not really forcing him to wait against his will. She is merely persuading him to decide to wait. It is an instruction for a determination of his own will, and not compulsion. While compulsion rejects free will, obligation works on free will and tries to change it so that the person has his own volition.

We can impose an obligation upon ourselves too. This can be seen in sentences where the subject is in the first person.

(7) I *must* pass the exams, because otherwise I won't get that job.

When I say this, I am imposing upon myself the obligation to pass the exams. I am accepting it and determined to take the exams. I am acting on my own free will. This is an expression of free will, and not of compulsion.

### 2.2.3.3. Kant on Obligation and Compulsion

Kant gives the same view when he says:

"Thus the will is not subject simply to the law, but so subject that it must be regarded as *itself giving the law*, and on this ground only, subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author)." (Kant, 1785: 60 in the original, 49 in the tr.) (Italics in the original.)

and also when he says,

"... the laws to which he is subject are *only those of his own giving*, though at the same time they are universal, and that he is only bound to act in conformity with his own will; a will, however, which is designed by nature to give universal laws." (Kant, 1785: 62-3 in the original, 51 in the tr.) (Italics in the original.)

When we speak of a person's obligation, we mean that he must do it of his own free will, not from compulsion. When a man says, "I must obey the law," he is not servile to the law. He is acting as a man of self-determination. He is indeed acting as a man of honour as Kant says:

"... although the conception of duty implies subjection to the law, we yet ascribe a certain *dignity and sublimity* to the person who fulfils all his duties. There is not, indeed, any sublimity in him, so far as he is subject to the moral law; but inasmuch as in regard to that very law he is likewise a legislator, and on that account alone subject to it, he has sublimity." (Kant, 1785: 58; 71 in the original.) (Italics in the original.)

### 2.2.4. 'Will' as an Ethical Term

Free will is always presupposed by obligation because obligation is a matter of ethics and ethics is only possible with a man of free will. This is the relationship between will and obligation.

The same argument applies to permission. Permission implies volition because permission to do an act is given on condition that the person in question has the will to do it (Miyahara, 1984). Permission is given only to a man of free will, and therefore permission implies free will.

Free will is thus at the basis of both obligation and permission. It is a basic term in ethics.

## 2.3. Obligation Implies Volition

### 2.3.1. Obligation Presupposes Volition to Do Otherwise

In addition to the implication relationship by way of will, there is a

direct implication relationship between obligation and volition. That is, in addition to presupposing the existence of free will, obligation presupposes its conflict with the will to evade it. It is a conflict between the obligation to do one thing and the volition to do another—something easier and more desirable. Obligation thus presupposes volition to do otherwise, volition not to do the prescribed act.

Nowell-Smith (1954) takes up this point:

"We talk of being obliged only when our desires are thwarted. .... When we talk about being obliged to do something we always have in mind a less irksome or arduous or complicated alternative that might have been possible under other circumstances." (Nowell-Smith, 1954: 206.)

It is clear that obligation becomes obligation just when it is contrasted with the volition not to do the act. Nowell-Smith also says:

"If a man talks about being obliged to take the shortest and easiest route we are puzzled to know what he means. What is he contrasting it with? ... It is when we have to deviate from our plans because of circumstances which make our task more difficult, irksome, or complicated than it would be under the optimum realizable conditions that we speak of 'being obliged' by circumstances and of motives which 'oblige' us to revise our plans." (Nowell-Smith, 1954: 203)

Obligation consists in its conflict with the volition to act otherwise. Where there is no volition of this kind, there is no obligation. In this respect, obligation implies volition.

### 2.3.2. Can Obligation Be Willingly Met?

#### 2.3.2.1. Obligation and Willingness

It might seem as if obligation were sometimes compatible with volition—as if we could have an obligation imposed upon us and be willing to do it at the same time.

One can say, for instance, that parents have the obligation to feed and clothe their children. And indeed, most parents do so quite willingly. With these parents, obligation and volition are not in conflict. Therefore, it might seem as if obligation could be in conformity with free will.

This is not the case. Obligation is a prescription which applies in case the person is not willing to do the required act. It does not take effect as long as he is willing to do the act. It is only when he is unwilling to do

the act that the obligation becomes effective and urges him to do the act. Therefore, we can still say that obligation and willingness are not compatible.

#### 2.3.2.2. The Function of Obligation

The function performed by obligation can be compared to that of many things in our life.

For instance, a postbox on a street corner near our home is quite useful when we need to post a letter, but when we have no letters or cards to post, it has no practical meaning to us. Nevertheless, it does not cease to be a postbox. There must have been a day when nobody used it, but it has not ceased to be a postbox. It has been, it is, and it will be, a postbox, because it can function as a postbox whenever required.

The function of obligation is to demand that a person do a particular act when he tries to evade it. It is always there in case it is called upon to function. But if he is willing to do the act, the obligation need not use its force, and then there are no questions of morality.

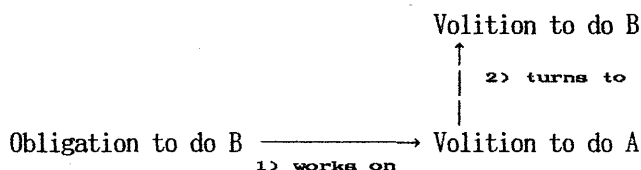
Kant gives us a good support on this point:

"On the other hand, it is a duty to maintain one's life; and, in addition, everyone has also a direct inclination to do so. But on this account the often anxious care which most men take for it has no intrinsic worth, and their maxim has no moral import. They preserve their life as duty requires, no doubt, but not because duty requires. On the other hand, if adversity and hopeless sorrow have completely taken away the relish for life; if the unfortunate one, strong in mind, indignant at his fate rather than desponding or dejected, wishes for death, and yet preserves his life without loving it—not from inclination or fear, but from duty—then his maxim has a moral worth. (Kant, 1785: 17 in the original, 13-4 in the tr.) (*Italics in the original.*)

When an act is done from inclination and happens to be in accordance with the duty prescribed by the moral law, it is not done from duty. It is not done on a conflict between volition and obligation. Duty in this case does not perform its function because it need not. This interpretation of duty and obligation by Kant supports our contention in the above that obligation stands on a conflict with volition.

#### (8) How Obligation Works

- 1) obligation to do B works on volition to do A, and
- 2) turns it to volition to do B



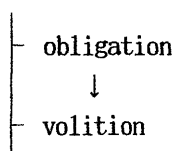
## 2.4. Summary

Obligation presupposes free will because it applies only to a man of free will. Moreover, obligation presupposes a conflict with volition to do otherwise, i.e., presupposes the existence of volition, and in this sense it implies volition. This can be formulated as in (9):

(9) obligation  $\sim$  volition

This implication relationship can be mapped on a scale of implication, with the higher term placed above the lower term. (Cp. (3) in section 1.2.)

(10) Scale of Implication



## 3. Obligation Implies Ability

### 3.1. Obligation Presupposes Ability

Whenever we impose upon a person an obligation to do something, we necessarily assume that the person has the ability to do it. It makes no sense to expect a person to do a thing when we know that he has no ability to do it, because it will never be done. So when we impose upon a person an obligation to do a thing, it must be that we believe in his ability to do it.

We sometimes try to impose an obligation on a person who insists that he cannot do the act. This might appear to suggest that obligation does not presuppose ability, and thus to disprove our contention. However, even in such cases, we still believe in his ability in spite of his denial. We are insisting that he should be able to do it in some way. He is saying he has no ability to do the act, and we are saying he has that ability. We impose the obligation upon him because we believe he has that ability. Therefore obligation still implies ability.

### 3.2. Support from Ethics

#### 3.2.1. Immanuel Kant

In Kant's ethics, ability is at the basis of obligation.

He says:

"To be beneficent when we can is a duty." (Kant, 1785: 17 in the original, 14 in the tr.) (*Italics mine.*)

"Since every practical law represents a possible action as good ..." (Kant 1785: 38 in the original, 31 in the tr.) (*Italics mine.*)

"Thus the imperative declares what action possible by me would be good, and presents the practical rule in relation to a will which does not forthwith perform an action simply because it is good..." (Kant 1785: 38 in the original, 31 in the tr.) (*Italics mine.*)

Thus possible actions alone can be discussed as matters of moral obligation.

He goes on to say:

"Whatever is possible only by the power of some rational being may also be conceived as a possible purpose of some will..." (Kant, 1785: 39 in the original, 32 in the tr.) (*Italics mine.*)

And acts performed by people in the past are examples of possible moral actions:

"...examples serve only for encouragement, i.e. they put beyond doubt the feasibility of what the law commands, they make visible that which the practical rules express more generally ..." (Kant, 1785: 31 in the original, 25 in the tr.) (*Italics mine.*)

More explicit pronouncements of the same view are found in the following:

"Pure reason then contains, in its practical, or more strictly, its moral use, principles of the possibility of experience, of such actions, namely, as, in accordance with ethical precepts, might be met with in the history of man. For reason commands that such actions should take place, ..." (Kant, 1787a: 458) (*Italics mine.*)

And the following is probably his most concise and forceful pronouncement of this view:

"This 'ought' expresses a possible action the ground of which cannot be anything but a mere concept. ... The action to which the 'ought' applies must indeed be possible under natural

conditions." (Kant, 1787: 575-6 in the original; 1787b: 260; 1787c: 473.) (Italics mine.)

We can also quote the following passage from his later work:

"...and to decide whether something is an object of pure practical reason or not, is only to discern the possibility or impossibility of willing the action by which, if we had the required power (about which experience must decide), a certain object would be realized. If the object be taken as the determining principle of our desire, it *must first be known whether it is physically possible by the free use of our powers, before we decide whether it is an object of practical reason or not.*" (Kant, 1788: 176 in the original; 148 in the tr.) (Italics mine.)

Kant's view on this relationship between obligation and possibility is generally known as:

'...Kantian formula of "Ought Implies Can."' (Mayo, 1958: 221)

A question might be raised here as to what is really meant by "possibility" or "can" in these quotations. Don't they just mean circumstantial possibility rather than personal ability? I will discuss this in section 3.3.3. For the moment here, I will simply quote a passage from Teale (1951), which shows that the word can should be interpreted as *be able*:

"Kant never used the phrase so often attributed to him, viz *ought implies can*, but on six occasions he says that a man must **be able to do** what he recognizes he **ought to do**." (Teale, 1951: 275) (Boldface mine.)

### 3.2.2. Modern Scholars of Ethics

The Kantian formula of "Ought Implies Can" is supported by many philosophers of modern times.

Mayo (1958) says:

"It is certainly true that *ought implies can*. If we know that a person literally cannot do what might otherwise be expected of him if, say, he has broken his leg, or is in prison, when the time comes for fulfilling a promise to meet us at Piccadilly Circus—then it is not merely ineffective to say that he ought to keep his appointment, it is meaningless to say so: the word 'ought' has no place in such a context." (Mayo, 1958: 221)

Thus when we impose upon a person an obligation, we take it for granted that it is possible for him to do it.

Teale (1951) says to the same effect in the following:

"Now it is true that I must unhesitatingly admit that it is possible for me to do what I recognize I ought to do, possible, not in the sense of 'possible but highly improbable', but possible in the sense of being within my reach, now, not in the future, but in the present, simultaneously with the thought; for otherwise *ought* would have no greater hold upon my mind than a mere wish." (Teale, 1951: 276)

Obligation thus applies on condition that we have the ability to discharge it.

Hare (1972) also supports the Kantian principle, and, going one step further, says that it applies not only to what he calls "moral" matters, but to all matters which can be expressed by 'ought'.

"But in fact this principle does not apply only to moral uses of 'ought'; I am inclined to say that it applies to all uses of 'ought', or at any rate to all uses whose function it is to pass judgement of any kind upon actions or to give advice about them. Thus, for example, if I say 'They ought to make a bypass around the town', it is a perfectly good rebuttal of this advice or judgement to say 'But they can't; there's the sea on one side, and on the other the cliffs come so close that the cost would be prohibitive'." (Hare, 1972: 1-2.)

And he concludes that:

"We may take it, then, that "'Ought' implies 'can'" is not a distinguishing mark of moral judgement as such; it is a distinguishing mark of a group of judgements of which moral judgements are one sub-group. We may characterize this group roughly by saying that it consists of those judgements whose function it is to do one of two things: either to give advice or guidance where there is a choice to be made, or to pass judgement upon a choice that has been made... 'Ought' implies 'can', whether in moral or non-moral contexts, because 'ought' is a prescriptive word." (Hare, 1972: 2)

The Kantian principle applies to all human acts. "'Ought' implies 'can'" means that obligation implies ability.

### 3.3. Circumstantial Impossibility and Personal Inability

#### 3.3.1. Demarcation Differs from Person to Person

It might still be possible to argue that when we say "'Ought implies 'can'" as in the above, 'can' can be either personal ability or circumstantial possibility. However, I claim that it is still a matter of ability rather

than circumstantial possibility. When there is circumstantial possibility, there is always personal ability, because when we say it is circumstantially possible, we must first have the ability to do it. For if we do not have the ability, it would still be impossible, and we would not call it circumstantially possible.

In Hare's example in the above of making a bypass around the town, it might seem to him that the geographical difficulty of having the sea on one side of the town and the cliffs on the other does form a circumstantial impossibility. In my view, however, they do not form impossibility, but mere difficulty, and it is still possible to make a bypass around the town if we are ready to pay the "prohibitive" cost. It is a matter of whether or not we are able to bear the cost, and therefore it is a matter of ability of the people concerned.

The same applies to Mayo's example. If a person has a broken leg or is in prison, he cannot fulfil his promise to meet us at Piccadilly Circus. This might be viewed as a case of circumstantial impossibility, for apparently it is these special circumstances that prevent him from moving around, while under ordinary circumstances he would be able to do so because he has the basic human ability to walk around. Therefore, this could be viewed as a case of circumstantial impossibility rather than personal inability.

However, we could argue with equal validity that he cannot go to Piccadilly Circus because he does not have the ability to do so by some means, not withstanding the given unusual circumstances—e.g., either by braving to walk in spite of the broken leg, or by riding on a wheelchair or by being carried on a stretcher, or, if he is in prison, by breaking out of prison, or by persuading the prison governor to let him go. This then is a case of personal inability rather than circumstantial impossibility.

Similarly, suppose that a man says "I can't ride a bicycle on this road because it is too rough," or "I can't ride the bicycle because it has a flat tyre." A commonsense view would be that these are cases of circumstantial impossibility. However, there may be an extraordinarily talented man who can ride a bicycle even on a rough road or even on a flat tyre. In the eyes of this man, what ordinary people call circumstantial impossibility is merely a matter of personal inability. What appears to be circumstantial impossibility in one person's view is personal inability in a more able person's view.

The above examples show that there is no fixed demarcation between circumstantial impossibility and personal inability. Whether people interpret one way or the other depends on how they view the case. It depends on where

they set the upper limit of ability. The higher the limit, the less the circumstantial impossibility. This upper limit differs from person to person. The difference can be illustrated by the following diagram.

(11) Circumstantial Impossibility and Personal Inability

| Person A                                                                  | Person B                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Circumstantial Impossibility (1)                                          | Circumstantial Impossibility                    |
| Circumstantial Impossibility (2)<br>(=personal inability in B's standard) | (the upper limit of B's ability)<br><br>Ability |
| (the upper limit of A's Ability)<br><br>Ability                           |                                                 |

3.3.2. Circumstantial Impossibility a Matter of Personal Inability

Although the demarcation between ability and circumstantial impossibility is not fixed, there is always a demarcation in one person's point of view. When I say I can do an act, there are always both circumstantial possibility and personal ability. When I say I cannot do an act, we mean either that although I have the requisite ability, circumstantial possibility is lacking, or that the requisite personal ability is lacking.

However, as we have seen in the previous section, circumstantial impossibility with one person is personal inability with a more able person. And some of the circumstantial impossibility with this able person falls in the category of personal inability compared with a still more able person. And after all, all the cases of circumstantial impossibility turn out to be those of personal inability by the standard of the almighty.

Therefore, when we speak of a matter of possibility and impossibility in a strict sense, we should be judging it by this almighty person's standard. If so, what is loosely called circumstantial impossibility turns out to be mere personal inability. We cannot speak of circumstantial impossibility in a

strict sense. All we have is personal ability and inability. The impossibility of walking to the moon is not circumstantial impossibility, but personal inability. The impossibility of flying from London to New York within an hour is not circumstantial impossibility, but is personal inability which happen to be common to ordinary human beings.

### 3.3.3. Personal Ability as the Basis of Ethics

Ability thus lies at the basis of possibility, and this should be the meaning of can when we say "Ought implies can." When we talk about ought, we always presuppose ability.

Hare (1963) says:

"It is because I can act in this way or that, that I ask 'Shall I act in this way or that?'; and it is typically, in my deliberations about this 'Shall I?' question that I ask the further, but related, question, 'Ought I to do this or that?'" (Hare, 1963: 51)

For the same reason, imperatives also imply 'can'. We cannot give a command to a person who we believe has no ability to execute it. It is pointless to give him the command.

Hare (1971) says:

"It would not do to tell a soldier to pick up his rifle if it were fixed to the ground." (Hare, 1971: 54)

In our interpretation, if the rifle is fixed to the ground and a soldier cannot pick it up, this is not a case of circumstantial impossibility. It is a matter of the soldier's inability. It would not be pointless to give him the same command if we have a good reason to believe that he has an extraordinary muscle strength. When and only when we know that he does not have the ability would there be no sense in issuing the command. After all, this is a matter of ability.

This principle applies to all types of directions. Lyons (1977) says:

"Not only mands, but all personal directions, including warnings, recommendations and exhortations, are governed also by the more general addressee-based condition that the speaker must believe that the addressee is able to comply with the directive. One cannot appropriately command, request, advise, or exhort someone to perform an action, which one knows or believes he is incapable of performing." (Lyons, 1977: 746)

Thus we presuppose the existence of ability whenever we make value

judgments of human conducts.

### 3.4. Obligation and Actual Inability

It sometimes happens that a person cannot do an act after saying that he has the obligation to do it. He cannot do it although he ought to do it. Does this invalidate the principle of 'Ought implies can'?

The answer is "No." The ability implied by obligation is an assumed ability, and not an actual ability. When we impose upon a person an obligation to do an act, we have the belief that he is capable of doing it. It does not matter whether or not he is actually able to do it. Just as obligation is asserted as a matter of belief, so is ability asserted as a matter of belief. Both obligation and ability as terms of modality are matters of belief.

When we assert that a person has the obligation to do an act, we are asserting our belief that he should be able to do it. It is in this sense of assumption that obligation implies ability.

### 3.5. Can We Say 'I Ought but I Can't'?

#### 3.5.1. View by Hare (1963): 'Possible as an Exception'

A question might be raised as to whether it is universally true that 'ought implies can.' We seem to say on occasions, "I ought but I can't." Does this invalidate the Kantian principle of 'ought implies can'?

Hare (1963) takes up this question:

"...it is not universally true that 'ought' ... implies 'can'; that is to say, there are many uses of 'ought' in which it is by no means inconsistent with 'cannot'." (Hare, 1963: 51-2.)

And he gives the following example.

- (12) "I ought to go and see him, but I can't, because I don't know where he is." (Hare, 1963: 53.)

According to him, *ought* in this example is used in a weak sense, and it merely means that "there is, as a matter of sociological fact, a moral convention" that people in these circumstances should do so, or that the person has "as a matter of psychological fact, feelings of guilt, remorse, &c.," for not doing so. In either case the speaker is only "prescribing in general terms, but exempting himself because of the impossibility, in his case, of obeying this general prescription." (Hare, 1963: 52.) Therefore, "In these cases, 'ought' fails to imply 'can' because it is not prescriptive in

meaning at all." (Hare, 1963: 52.) This would mean that there are exceptions to the Kantian principle.

### 3.5.2. Counter-argument: 'Not an Exception'

However, I argue that the above example does not constitute an exception. It is true that when a person says "I ought to go and see him, but I can't," he is "prescribing in general terms." It is also true that the man is "exempting himself because of the impossibility, in his case, of obeying this general prescription." In this case, however, he is actually denying the obligation. He is saying that the obligation does not apply to him as an individual. His utterance has something like the following structure:

- (13) [The moral convention would prescribe that] I *ought* to go and see him, but [in my particular case] I *can't*, because I don't know where he is [, and after all, I don't think I ought to go and see him].

This "ought" does not derive from his own judgment, and he does not accept it. The "can't," on the other hand, comes from his own judgment, and it is his belief. The two modal terms come from two different sources—two different authorities of ethical conducts. So there is no contradiction between the two modal terms. This is not a case of 'ought' failing to imply 'can.' It does not form an exception to the Kantian principle.

### 3.6. Summary

I have argued that *can* implied by *ought* is, in a strict sense, not a matter of circumstantial impossibility, but a matter of personal ability. I have also argued that a case presented by Hare as an example of *ought* failing to imply *can* does not constitute a counter-example to the Kantian principle. We can still maintain that obligation implies ability as in:

- (14) obligation  $\sim$  ability

And this implication relationship can be shown as in the following diagram:

- (15)  $\left| \begin{array}{l} \text{obligation} \\ \downarrow \\ \text{ability} \end{array} \right.$

#### 4. Permission Implies Ability

##### 4.1. Permission Presupposes Ability

##### 4.1.1. Implication by Way of Volition

There is also an implication relationship between permission and ability. When we give someone permission to do something, we assume that he is able to do the act.

Arguments for this relationship may well be made by way of the relationship between volition and ability: Permission implies volition (Miyahara, 1984: 341-3); volition implies ability (Miyahara, 1984: 344-5); therefore permission implies ability:

(16) permission  $\sim$  [volition  $\sim$  ] ability.

That is, when we give a person permission to do an act, we give it on condition that he asks for it. And when he asks for permission to do the act, he should be willing to do it. And when he is willing to do it, he should be able to do it. Therefore, when we give a person permission to do an act, it should be that we presuppose not only his willingness but also his ability. In this sense permission implies ability.

However, our purpose in this section is to explore a direct implication relationship between permission and ability.

##### 4.1.2. Direct Implication

Suppose we give a person permission to do something while it is not explicitly sought. For instance, a teacher, after detaining a pupil for a chide after school, may say to him:

(17) That is all—You may go now. (*Chambers Compact Dictionary*, 1992: Entry "may".)

The teacher can say this without the pupil asking for permission to leave, because he takes it for granted that the pupil is willing to leave. He issues the permission because he presupposes the willingness. But we must note here that he presupposes not only the willingness but also the ability of the pupil to leave -- the ability to walk away when the permission is given. He has no doubt about that. His belief in the pupil's ability to leave is not based on the pupil's willingness to leave, because this volition is not expressed. It is impossible to assume the existence of ability by way of willingness. The teacher simply assumes the ability. He gives the pupil permission to walk away because he assumes his ability to do so. If he does not assume it, he

would not even think of giving the permission; he would not even try to relate the pupil to the act of leaving. Whenever we give a person permission to do something, therefore, we assume his ability to do it. Permission always implies ability.

#### 4.2. Can We Give Permission without Presupposing Ability?

Can we issue permission without presupposing ability? Would it be all right, for instance, to say a sentence like:

(18) ?You *may* walk to the moon although I don't think you can.

In our common sense, this sentence would be unacceptable because it is difficult for us to believe that the addressee can walk to the moon. However, it would be acceptable if we interpret *walk* as equivalent to *try to walk*. In that case the permission applies to *try to walk*, not to *walk*. Permission should be directed to an act which can be performed, and *try to walk to the moon* is a possible act. Indeed, when we speak of either obligation or permission, the act must be a possible act in the sense that the person has the ability to do it. If the person has no ability to do the act, the act is an impossible act, and if it is an impossible act, there is no ethical problem of permission or prohibition. We cannot give permission without presupposing ability.

#### 4.3. Permission Given on Conditional Ability

In contrast to the preceding example, it would be quite normal to say as in:

(19) You *may* walk to the moon if you can.

This example illustrates a case in which the speaker is not sure of the ability of the addressee. This might appear to show that permission might not necessarily presuppose ability. In this case, however, the speaker is offering the permission *on condition* that the addressee has the ability to do the act. The speaker implies that the permission applies only when he has the requisite ability. This is evidence that permission-giving presupposes ability—evidence that we have to presuppose ability whenever we give permission.

Example (19) also shows that the speaker is ready to retract the permission if the person in question does not have the requisite ability. Thus permission always presupposes ability, and in this sense permission implies

ability.

#### 4.4. Permission Given on Supernatural Ability?

Furthermore, it would not be quite bizarre to give permission like the following:

- (20) You *may* walk to the moon as you have the ability to do so.  
(or as I believe you have the ability to do so.)

This kind of permission may be found in science fiction where some characters are supposed to have the ability to walk to the moon. There is nothing wrong with this sentence either grammatically or semantically.

If the same statement is given in our daily conversation, it will surely sound bizarre, but the bizarreness does not come from the use of modal *may* in relation to the assumption of ability. The bizarreness lies in the assumption that some people have the ability to walk to the moon, which is inconceivable in our daily experience. However, there is nothing wrong with the combination of the permission and the supposed ability per se. And indeed, in the same science fiction, a member of an expedition can be given a command like: "Walk to the moon at once. And come back within ten minutes." This means that permission can be given even on an unrealistic assumption of ability. All we need is that the requisite ability is presupposed.

#### 4.5. Permission Asked without Ability

What will happen if a person asks for permission to do something while we do not believe that he has the ability to do it? A natural response will be to refuse the permission. This can be illustrated by the following:

- (21) Son: May I ride your horse, dad?  
Father: No, you *may* not. You don't know how to ride a horse.

Here the father does not think his son has the ability to ride a horse. So he refuses to give permission. He cannot issue permission without presupposing the requisite ability.

If he does not want to refuse permission flatly while disbelieving the ability, he *may* make a compromise and say as in the following conversation:

- (22) Son: May I ride your horse, dad?  
Father: I don't think you *can*, but you *may* try.

The father does not believe that his son has the ability to ride the horse, so

instead of issuing permission to "ride", he issues permission to "try to ride". This permission he can issue without hesitation, because he believes that his son has at least the ability to "try to ride" the horse. The permission to "try to ride" presupposes the ability to "try to ride". Here again permission implies ability.

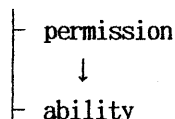
#### 4.6. Summary

When permission is given to a person to do something, it is presupposed that the person has the ability to do it, whether the presupposition is in the form of belief, (as in "I am sure you can", etc.), or in the form of condition upon which the permission is given (as in "if you can"). In this sense permission implies ability, and this can be formulated as:

(23) permission  $\sim$  ability

By this implication relationship, permission has a higher place than ability on the scale of modality, and this can be shown as in the following diagram:

(24)



### 5. Conclusion

#### 5.1. Summary of the Discussion

In my earlier paper (Miyahara, 1984) and in this paper, I have examined every possible implication relationship between the four terms of root modality. In the earlier paper I have examined the relationships between two adjacent terms of modality from obligation at the top to ability at the bottom. And I have established the three implication relationships: obligation implies permission; permission implies volition; and volition implies ability. And by combining these three into one I have obtained a straight line of implication relationships as in the following:

(25)=(1) obligation  $\sim$  permission  $\sim$  volition  $\sim$  ability

I have also translated this chain of implication relationships into a scale on which the implying term is placed above the implied, and I designated this as degrees of force or potency of modality. This scale is diagrammed as in

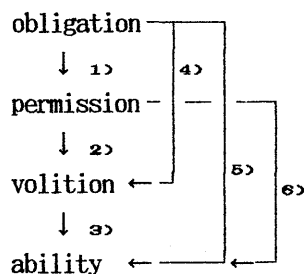
the following:

(26) System of Root Modality

|                                 | TERMS       | MEANINGS                                               | FORMS<br>(MODAL AUXILIARIES) |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| P<br>O<br>T<br>E<br>N<br>C<br>Y | -obligation | (categorically obliged)<br>(non-categorically obliged) | MUST<br>OUGHT TO, SHALL      |
|                                 | -permission | (be permitted)                                         | MAY                          |
|                                 | -volition   | (be willing)                                           | WILL                         |
|                                 | -ability    | (be able)                                              | CAN                          |

The present paper has examined the implication relationships between the terms which are not adjacent—the relations that are not covered by the earlier paper. In the following figure, the implication relationships 1)-3) are covered by the previous paper, and those of 4)-6) are discussed in this paper.

(27)



The relationships 1) through 6) exhaust all possible relationships between the four terms of root modality. Every term has been related to every other, and an implication relationship has been established. The results show that the four terms are closely related to each other to form a tightly-knit hierarchical system. They form a self-sufficient semantic system, and this is the category of 'root' modality.

The fact that these four terms form a self-sufficient semantic system requires that they should be treated as a single grammatical system. The four terms should not be broken into two kinds such as deontic modality (of obligation and permission) and "dynamic" (Cp. Palmer, 1979, 1986) modality (of volition and ability). This type of division brings no benefit to our

understanding of root modality. It disrupts the real nature and function of root modality.

## 5.2. Case for an Ethical Modality

### 5.2.1. Volition and Ability in Root Modality

Of the four terms of root modality, obligation and permission are the main topics in the literature of deontic logic. (Cp. von Wright, 1951: 2; Lyons, 1977: section 17.4 "Deontic Modality".) Volition and ability are not given much treatment there. This appears to be the main reason why some linguists try to separate volition and ability from deontic modality and set up a "dynamic modality" (which we have briefly mentioned in the previous section).

It is clear now that volition and ability are closely connected with obligation and permission. They are prerequisites of obligation and permission. Their existence is always implied when we talk about obligation and permission. They are the essential attributes of human beings that make it possible to talk about the "practical" (i.e. ethical) matters of obligation and permission. If volition and ability are lacking, there are no questions of obligation and permission. Volition and ability are bases of deontology. Obligation, permission, volition and ability are thus systematically related to each other.

If the theory of deontology could include the concepts of volition and ability in its system, "deontic modality" would be the proper term for the category of obligation, permission, volition and ability. However, the traditional deontology does not treat volition and ability as legitimate terms in its system. The term deontology is not quite satisfactory.

### 5.2.2. Root Modality as an Ethical Modality

The term 'root modality' expresses nothing about the semantic property of the category. The term 'deontic modality,' on the other hand, is too narrow, and expresses only half of this modality. In view of this, it is more appropriate to use the term 'ethical modality,' because this unmistakably includes not only obligation and permission but also volition and ability, and therefore better represents the nature and use of this modality.

Ethical modality is a system which is unified and governed by obligation as the highest term, permission as the second, volition as the third, and ability at the basis. It is a modality of ethics. Ethics is a system which deals with norms of, or judgements about, the conduct of human beings living in society. (Cp. Lillie, 1957:2-3) It deals with obligation and permission,

goodness and badness, desirability and non-desirability of acts, attitudes and situations, including not only moral matters in the narrower sense, but also legal matters and daily matters of expediency. All these matters, which are related to our welfare, should be grouped as matters of ethics.

This ethical modality can be contrasted with 'epistemic modality,' or 'logical modality,' which deals with non-ethical situations in the worlds of physics and logic. By contrasting the graded meanings of "ethical" necessity and possibility (obligation, permission, volition and ability—a system of ethics) and "logical" necessity and possibility (certainty, probability, and possibility—a system of epistemology or logical possibility), will we be able to fully appreciate the importance, significance, and parallelism of the two kinds of modality in English syntax and semantics.

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