

(This is the 2nd video in the series that begins with Video 45)

In this video (Video 45), I critiqued a simple argument against positive rights. Here I'll critique another one.

I've heard it argued there can't be positive rights because they'd be impossible to respect. In other words:

(P1*) If there are positive rights, then there are *unsatisfiable* obligations.

(P2*) But there are no *unsatisfiable* obligations.

(P3*) So, there are no positive rights.

The idea behind premise 1 is that if someone has a positive right—a right to some sort of aid—that entails others have an obligation to provide them with aid. But some people are not in a position to provide aid.

For instance, perhaps positive obligations are typically satisfied by volunteering or giving money to those in need. But not everyone has free time to volunteer and not everyone can afford to give money away.

Premise 2 assumes we only have obligations if it's possible to satisfy them. As it's often said, "Ought" implies "Can", so you're obligated to do something only if you *can* do it.

However, I think we should reject premise 1. Positive rights don't necessarily entail unsatisfiable obligations, since obligations can be conditional in form: IF (and ONLY IF) you're able to provide aid, THEN you must do so.

For instance, you have an obligation to save a drowning child only if you're in a position to help—if you're near the child and can save them at little cost to yourself. But if you're nowhere near the child or don't know how to swim and would risk drowning yourself, then you don't have the obligation to save them.