John Searle\(^1\) has us consider the following series of statements:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Jones uttered the words “I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars”.
\item Jones promised to pay Smith five dollars.
\item Jones placed himself under (undertook) an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
\item Jones is under an obligation to pay Smith five dollars.
\item Jones ought to pay Smith five dollars.
\end{enumerate}

Searle argues that any statement in the series entails its successor when combined with either analytic statements or purely descriptive statements or both.

Judith and James Thompson\(^2\) have argued that Searle is mistaken in the last step of his argument. They argue that the premise

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(4a)] Other things are equal.
\end{enumerate}

needed by Searle in order to deduce (5) from (4) is covertly an ethical premise. (4a) must be understood in such a way that it entails the statement:

Jones has no stronger obligation that conflicts with paying Smith five dollars.

However this statement is an ethical one. We will not attempt to determine whether the Thompson argument is correct. However, one thing is clear. Their argument against Searle does not show that (4), a statement of \textit{prima facie} obligation, cannot be deduced from (1) combined with analytic statements or descriptive statements or both. But another objection can be brought against Searle's deduction of (4) as well. The objection can be seen more clearly if we consider another example.
Suppose

(1') Goebbels uttered the words “I hereby promise you, Hitler, I will kill five million Jews”.

By an argument similar to Searle’s one arrives at

(4') Goebbels is under an obligation to kill five million Jews.

Yet this is absurd. Neither Goebbels nor anyone else could be under a moral obligation, that is have a *prima facie* moral obligation, to perform a morally outrageous act. This suggests that there is something wrong with Searle’s mode of reasoning up to (4) since the same mode of reasoning leads to (4).

One may well suspect that Searle’s argument assumes an unstated ethical premise which we will refer to as P:

(P) Jones’ paying Smith five dollars is not a morally outrageous act.

What is uncertain is at what step in the argument one should claim that P is assumed. Does P state one of the conditions of Jones’ making a promise to pay Smith? This seems implausible. It certainly seems possible to promise to do something morally outrageous.

Another suggestion is that P states a condition of placing oneself under an obligation. If so, then Searle’s (2a) is mistaken. Searle argues that:

(2a) All promises are acts of placing oneself under an obligation to do the thing promised.

is analytically true. However, it might be argued that (2a) is not even true, let alone analytically true. For if one makes a promise to do a morally outrageous act one has not placed oneself under any moral obligation. Thus (2a) should be replaced by:

(2a') All promises are acts of placing oneself under an obligation to do the thing promised only if the thing promised is not morally outrageous.

Another suggestion is that P states a condition for Jones being under an obligation. In this case Searle’s

(3a) Other things are equal.