

Reasons First, Deontic Logic Second

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1. Introduction

- Aims and outlook of the talk

I suggest a novel, explanatorily powerful version of the view that one ought to do what one has most reason to do (§§2-3).

The suggested account confirms intuitive judgements in a wide range of cases. Moreover it entails important deontic principles (e.g., ‘if one ought to [φ and ψ], then one ought to φ , and one ought to ψ ’) (§4).

While some of the account’s implications might seem counterintuitive (§5), it is, as I argue, to be preferred over competing ones (§6).

That this is so, and that some of the entailed deontic principles are controversial elements of ‘Standard Deontic Logic’ (SDL), provides a reason for preferring SDL over alternative systems in deontic logic.

- Previewing the main idea

The core of the account I suggest is the Balancing View of ought:

(BV) One ought to φ if, and only if, for each incompatible alternative to φ -ing, the reasons for φ -ing are weightier than those for the alternative.
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As I argue, (BV) yields correct verdicts on cases only when paired with principles of reasons transmission, specifying how reasons for φ -ing provide reasons both for more specific ways of φ -ing and for more general options that φ -ing is a way of doing.

Complementing (BV) in the required way results in an account that offers strong explanatory resources.

2. Complementing the Balancing View (I)

- Reasons against

(BV) mentions only reasons *for* actions. Since reasons *against* actions undeniably also play a role in determining oughts, (BV) needs to be complemented with a version of the view that reasons against are nothing but reasons for. I suggest:

(RA) A reason against φ -ing is nothing but a reason for refraining from φ -ing.
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- Inward transmission – principle (R_i)

Distress I. *A* is in great distress, and so is *B*. One faces the mutually incompatible options *x*-ing, *y*-ing, and *z*-ing. *x*-ing would help only *A*, *y*-ing would help both *A* and *B*, and *z*-ing would help only *B*.

Plausibly, there is a reason for helping *A*, i.e., for [*x*-ing or *y*-ing], and there is a reason for helping *B*, i.e., for [*y*-ing or *z*-ing]. Since *y*-ing is a way of helping both *A* and *B*, it seems plausible that one ought to *y*.

According to (BV), one ought to *y* only if there is a reason for *y*-ing. The following principle entails that this is so:

(R_i) A non-derivative reason for φ -ing provides equally weighty (derivative) reasons for each way of φ -ing.¹

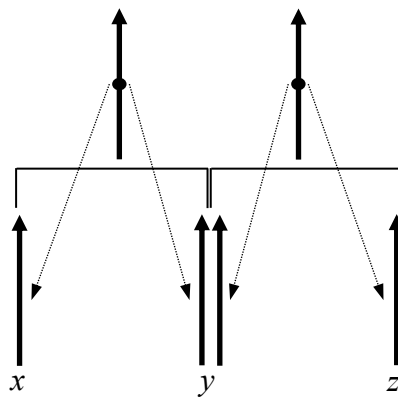


Figure 1. Applying (R_i) to *Distress I*

If the two derivative reasons for *y*-ing aggregate – i.e., if they are, in combination, weightier than each one of them individually –, then (BV) entails that one ought to *y* (see Figure 1).²

3. Complementing the Balancing View (II)

- Outward transmission – principle (R_o)

Distress II. *A* is in great distress, and so is *B*. One faces the mutually incompatible options *x*-ing, *y*-ing, and *z*-ing. *x*-ing would help only *A*, *y*-ing would help only *B*, and *z*-ing would help neither.

Plausibly, there are equally weighty reasons for *x*-ing and for *y*-ing, and one ought to [*x* or *y*].

According to (BV), one ought to [*x* or *y*] only if there is a reason for [*x*-ing or *y*-ing]. The following principle entails that this is so:

¹ A reason for φ -ing *provides* a reason for ψ -ing iff the fact that there is a reason for φ -ing (partly) explains that there is a reason for ψ -ing. A reason is *derivative* iff it is provided by another reason.

² If you disagree that the reasons for *y*-ing aggregate, then you will also disagree that one ought to *y*.

(R_o) If ϕ -ing is a way of ψ -ing, then a reason for ϕ -ing provides an equally weighty reason for ψ -ing.

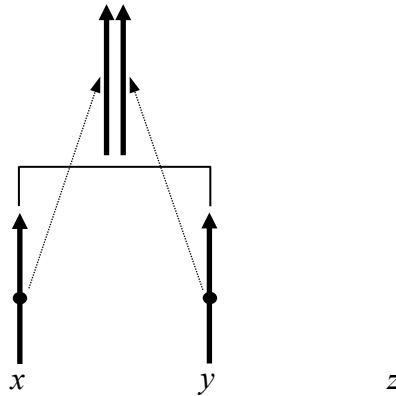


Figure 2. Applying (R_o) to *Distress II*

When (BV) is applied to the situation shown in Figure 2, it entails that one ought to [x or y].

- A ban on aggregation

Plausibly, in *Distress II*, the reasons for [x-ing or y-ing] do not aggregate, since there is no way of [x-ing or y-ing] that is favoured by each of the two non-derivative reasons that they are provided by.

- Completing the analysis of *Distress I*

That (R_o), other than (R_i), is not restricted to non-derivative reasons is as it should be. Otherwise, the account would not entail that, in *Distress I*, one ought to refrain from x-ing and from z-ing.

- Other cases

The account yields intuitively correct verdicts across a broad range of other cases.

4. Deontic Principles

- Options and actions: a general framework

Options can be identified with the set of the specific actions (and omissions) that are ways of doing them. Then, for two options ϕ -ing and ψ -ing:

- $[\phi \wedge \psi]$ is the set of set specific actions that are ways of ϕ -ing and of ψ -ing.
- $[\phi \vee \psi]$ is the set of set specific actions that are ways of ϕ -ing or of ψ -ing.

- Some deontic principles entailed by the account

With this framework in place, the suggested account can be shown to entail important deontic principles ('O(...)') is to be read as 'one ought to ...').

(O_D) If $O(\varphi \wedge \psi)$, then $O(\varphi)$ and $O(\psi)$.

The proof of (O_D) is relatively straightforward and requires only (BV) and (R_o).³

(O_A) If $O(\varphi)$ and $O(\psi)$, then $O(\varphi \wedge \psi)$.

The proof of (O_A) is less straightforward than the one of (O_D). Other than the proof of (O_D), it requires bringing into play all elements of the suggested account.

(O_D) and (O_A) are core elements of Standard Deontic Logic (SDL).

5. Controversial implications

- Controversial implication about oughts

Some of the deontic principles entailed by the account and, with them, SDL as a whole, are controversial. For instance, (O_D) entails the following closure principle:

(O_C) If $O(\varphi)$, then $O(\varphi \vee \psi)$.

This principle gives rise to 'Ross' paradox':

Letter. One has promised to post a letter and faces the options of either doing so, or burning the letter, or not doing anything with it.

Plausibly, one ought to post the letter. Then, (O_C) entails that one ought to post the letter or burn it. Thus, burning the letter is a way of doing something that one ought to do.

- Controversial implications about reasons

- (R_o) gives rise to a variant of Ross' paradox: if one has a reason for posting the letter, then (R_o) entails that one has a reason for [posting the letter or burning it]. Thus, burning the letter is a way of doing something that one has a reason to do.
- The combination of (R_i) and (R_o) entails that, in *Distress I*, the reason for [x-ing or y-ing] provides both a reason for x-ing and (via a two-step transmission chain) a reason for refraining from x-ing.

³ Assume that $O(\varphi \wedge \psi)$. Without loss of generality, it needs to be shown that the account entails that $O(\varphi)$.

Since doing $[\varphi \wedge \psi]$ is a way of φ -ing, (R_o) entails that the set of reasons for doing $[\varphi \wedge \psi]$ provides an equally weighty set of reasons for φ -ing. Assuming that – in the context under discussion – adding a reason to a set of reasons does not make the set less weighty, it follows that the reasons for φ -ing are at least as weighty as those for doing $[\varphi \wedge \psi]$. Since $O(\varphi \wedge \psi)$, the reasons for doing $[\varphi \wedge \psi]$ are weightier than those for each incompatible alternative. Since each incompatible alternative to φ -ing is an incompatible alternative to doing $[\varphi \wedge \psi]$, (BV) entails $O(\varphi)$.

- The inescapability of the implications

An account the core of which is (BV) is bound to have the implications just stated.

- If (BV) is to entail that, in *Letter*, one ought to refrain from doing nothing, it is bound to entail that one ought to [post the letter or burn it]. Thus, Ross' paradox in either of its variants cannot be avoided.
- If (BV) is to entail that, in *Distress I*, one ought to y , there is no alternative to (R_i) – unless (BV) is to become an explanatorily idle wheel. And once (R_i) is assumed, the second implication stated before cannot be avoided.

There are ways of mitigating the implausibility of these implications.

6. Theoretical alternatives?

- Ought and overall weight

(BV_O) One ought to φ if, and only if, for each incompatible alternative to φ -ing, the overall weight of the reasons bearing on φ -ing is greater than the one of the reasons bearing on the alternative.

Assume that (BV_O) is combined with the view that the overall weight of the reasons bearing on φ -ing is a function of the weights of the reasons for φ -ing and of those against φ -ing.

This package has been suggested (in different versions) as an account that does not require transmission principles. But it returns incorrect verdicts on cases:

- In *Distress I*, neither of the options x -ing, y -ing, and z -ing has a non-derivative reason for it nor one against it.

Thus, for each of these options, the overall weight of the reasons bearing on it is zero, and (BV_O) does not entail that one ought to y .

- In *Distress II*, neither of the options [x -ing or y -ing] and z -ing has a non-derivative reason for it nor one against it.

Thus, for each of these options, the overall weight of the reasons bearing on it is zero, and (BV_O) does not entail that one ought to [x or y].

- Outlook

In view of cases such as *Distress I* and *Distress II*, the prospects for an account that invokes neither principles like (R_i) and (R_o) , nor a structurally similar explanation of how reasons for φ -ing support both ways of φ -ing and options that φ -ing is a way of doing, are dim.

7. Conclusion

The proposed account arguably covers all relevant cases and supports reasons-based explanations not only of individual deontic facts but also of significant deontic principles.

While some of its implications may seem counterintuitive, there are strong reasons to favour it over theoretical alternatives.

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