

*The transmission principle (TP):* If A ought to  $\phi$ , and  $\psi$ -ing is a necessary means for A to  $\phi$ , then A ought to  $\psi$ .

- validates a plausible and widely used form of inference in practical reasoning.
- plays an important role in a number of philosophical arguments, such as Schroeder's account of means/end-incoherence (2009), Setiya's argument against the wide-scope account of instrumental rationality (2007), Way's argument for skepticism about so-called wrong kind of reasons (2012).

*The actualist challenge:* Ought we to take the necessary means to actions we ought to perform even if we will not actually (or are unlikely to) perform these actions? Actualists, such as Jackson and Pargetter (1986), would say no.

*Aim of this paper:* Defend TP against the actualist challenge and present an independent argument for it.

## 1. PRELIMINARIES

TP, as I understand it here, employs the *deliberative sense of 'ought'*, which

- settles the conclusion of practical deliberation about what to do
- requires us to do what we have all things considered most reason to do
- is the sense of 'ought' in which believing that one ought to  $\phi$  rationally commits one to intending to  $\phi$  (cf. Broome 2013).

A *means* is

- a type of action  $\psi$  that *helps to bring about* some state of affairs (where the state of affairs relevant for TP is the one in which the agent performs some other action  $\phi$ )
- 'helping to bring about' need not be *causing*, but may also be constituting, or preventing something that would prevent A's  $\phi$ -ing
- 'action' includes negative actions (i.e. omissions); refraining from doing something can be a means

TP is not to be conflated with

- (1) *the principle of instrumental rationality*, according to which we ought, or are rationally required, to intend what we believe to be the necessary means to ends we intend
  - (2) *the deontic closure principle*, according to which we ought to  $\phi$  whenever our  $\phi$ -ing is entailed by our doing something else we ought to do
- is vulnerable to Ross' paradox: it validates the inference from "you ought to mail the letter" to "you ought to mail the letter or burn it" (Ross 1941). TP avoids this paradox: [mailing or burning] the letter is a logical consequence of, but not a *means* to mailing the letter.

## 2. ACTUALISM, POSSIBILISM, AND TRANSMISSION

- Consequentialism: what we ought to do depends on the value (or expected, or expectable value) of the outcomes of our actions.
- Actualism vs. possibilism: Are the relevant outcomes the *actual* ones or the ones that are *possible* for us to achieve?
- Deontologists need not (and should not) deny that *some* of our reasons are provided by the (expected or expectable) value of outcomes, and thus face the same question regarding such “outcome-given” reasons.
- Assume for the following discussion: If only outcome-given reasons are present, then...

*Actualism*: A ought to  $\phi$  iff  $\phi$ -ing is an option such that what *would* happen if A  $\phi$ -s is (expectably) better than what would happen if A does not  $\phi$  (cf. Goldman 1976; Jackson and Pargetter 1986; Goble 1993).

*Possibilism*: A ought to  $\phi$  iff  $\phi$ -ing is an option such that what *could* happen as a result of A's exercising her agency if A  $\phi$ -s is (expectably) better than what could happen as a result of A's exercising her agency if A does not  $\phi$  (cf. Goldman 1978; Zimmerman 2008).

- Depending on the expectability amendment, the resulting views will be objectivist or perspectivist versions of actualism and possibilism.

*Professor Procrastinate [PP]*: “Professor Procrastinate receives an invitation to review a book. He is the best person to do the review, has the time, and so on. The best thing that can happen is that he says yes, and then writes the review when the book arrives. However, suppose it is further the case that were Procrastinate to say yes, he would not in fact get around to writing the review. Not because of incapacity or outside interference, but because he would keep on putting the task off. (This has been known to happen.) Thus, although the best that can happen is for Procrastinate to say yes and then write, and he *can* do exactly this, what *would* in fact happen were he to say yes is that he would not write the review. Moreover, we may suppose, this latter is the worst that can happen. It would lead to the book not being reviewed at all [...]” (Jackson and Pargetter 1986, 235)

- Since what *would* happen if PP rejects the invitation is better than what would happen if he accepts, actualism implies: PP ought to reject.
- Since what *could* happen if PP accepts the invitation is better than what could happen if he rejects, possibilism entails that PP ought to accept.
- Since what *would or could* happen if PP [accepts and writes] is better than what would or could happen if he does not [accept and write], both actualism and possibilism imply: PP ought to [accept and write].
- Since accepting is a necessary means to [accepting and writing], actualism violates TP.

## 3. AGAINST ACTUALISM

Familiar point (cf. Zimmerman 2008): actualism is incompatible not only with TP but also with other plausible principles, such as:

*Distribution*: If A ought to [ $\phi$  and  $\psi$ ], then A ought to  $\phi$  and A ought to  $\psi$ .  
(Let  $\phi$  = accept,  $\psi$  = write)

*Agglomeration*: If A ought to  $\phi$  and A ought to  $\psi$ , then A ought to [ $\phi$  and  $\psi$ ].  
(Let  $\phi$  = accept and write,  $\psi$  = reject)

Although plausible, these principles are not uncontroversial. A better argument against actualism starts from the observation that it violates:

*Joint satisfiability (JS)*: If A ought to  $\phi$  and A ought to  $\psi$ , then it is possible for A to [ $\phi$  and  $\psi$ ].  
(Let  $\phi$  = accept and write,  $\psi$  = reject)

*The deliberative argument*: JS is essential for the deliberative ‘ought’. The fact that actualism is incompatible with it therefore constitutes a *reductio* of actualism about the deliberative ‘ought’.

1. The deliberative ‘ought’ is the sense in which believing one ought to  $\phi$  rationally commits one to intending to  $\phi$ . Hence, if JS is false, one could – simply by believing the truth – come to be rationally committed to intending actions one knows to be incompatible. Moreover, since intending actions one knows to be incompatible is itself irrational, it follows that in such situations one is necessarily irrational just because one believes the truth about what one ought to do. This is absurd.
2. The deliberative ‘ought’ is supposed to settle the conclusions of practical deliberation of what to do. But if you arrive at incompatible ‘ought’-judgments you haven’t settled the question of what to do. So if practically incompatible ‘ought’-statements can be true, they are not statements about the deliberative ‘ought’.

Jackson & Pargetter’s response to the worry that actualism violates JS:

- (i) The question whether A ought to  $\phi$  must be understood as the question whether A ought to  $\phi$  relative to the set of options { $\phi$ -ing; not- $\phi$ -ing}.
  - (ii) JS is plausible only for ‘oughts’ that are relativised to the same set of options.
- Hence, there is no problem! Procrastinate ought not to accept, relative to {accept; not-accept}, and he ought to [accept and write], relative to {accept and write; not-[accept and write]}. No reason to think that JS should apply.

This response is ineffective against the deliberative argument:

1. Suppose *first* that the option-relative account is supposed to capture the deliberative ‘ought’ (= ought-statements settling the conclusion of practical deliberation are relativised to different sets of options). On this assumption, the arguments given entail that JS will govern *some* ‘oughts’ that are relativised to different sets, and (ii) is false.
2. Suppose *second* that the option-relative account is *not* supposed to capture the deliberative ‘ought’. This seems more plausible; the deliberative ‘ought’ seems relative to *all* options if relative to options at all. Then, nothing in this response calls into question that actualism is false about the deliberative ‘ought’.

#### 4. AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF THE ACTUALIST INTUITION

- A tension of intuitions: On the one hand, it seems wrong to reject the invitation, on the other hand, it seems right.
- Actualism can explain this, but how can possibilism explain the intuition that there is something right about rejecting?
- Proposal: PP ought to accept, but he also ought to *make sure that if he will not write, then he does not accept*. So if he rejects, he satisfies this ‘wide scope’ obligation.
- This explains the tension in a way that is compatible with all the mentioned plausible principles, including TP.

*But doesn't it follow that PP ought to reject?*

- Jackson and Pargetter (1986, 237–238): “considerations to do with conditional obligation support that Procrastinate ought to say no: Detachment for conditional obligation is valid. If I ought to do X given Y, and Y is the case, then I ought to do X.”
- I agree. But I do not claim that PP is under a conditional obligation to reject given that he will not write. Instead, he is under an obligation to make a conditional true. Since he *can* make the conditional true by making the antecedent false, no obligation to make the consequent true can be detached.

*But isn't this a very unhelpful answer to give in advice?*

- If PP wants to know whether he ought to accept, the answer is yes. But there is still a point in telling him that there is another, perhaps more important obligation, namely to make sure that he does not accept if he will not write.
- This is the most helpful advice we can give. It seems clearly better advice than saying “You ought to reject and you ought to accept and write”.

## 5. BROOME'S OBJECTION

*Broome's counterexample to TP:* Suppose that you ought to see your doctor, and that taking a day off is a necessary means for doing so. TP entails that you ought to take a day off. But suppose that if you were in fact taking a day off work, you would not visit your doctor but instead sit around feeling anxious. In this case, Broome maintains, it is implausible that you ought to take a day off (cf. Broome 2013, 126).

*Broome's claim:* If you will not see your doctor, you are permitted not to take a day off.

→ less vulnerable than actualism because it only involves a permission not to take the necessary means.

However:

1. It is difficult to see how Broome could deny that you ought to [take a day off and go to the doctor]. If we assume this, then Broome is committed to denying *distribution*.
2. It is difficult to see how Broome could deny that you ought not to take a day off. After all, he allows that the reasons to take a day off can be *counterbalanced* without it being the case that the reasons for seeing the doctor are counterbalanced – but if this is possible, then it should also be possible that these reasons can be *outweighed* to the effect that you ought not to take a day off. It follows that Broome is committed to denying *agglomeration* and *joint satisfiability* as well.

It is better to substitute Broome's claim with a wide-scope permission and regard the latter as consequence of a wide-scope 'ought':

*Wide-scope permission:* You are permitted to make sure that if you will not see your doctor, you do not take a day off.

*Wide-scope 'ought':* You ought to make sure that if you will not see your doctor, you do not take a day off.

→ Since no 'ought' or permission not to take a day off can be detached from these claims, they are compatible with TP. Since we avoid counterintuitive results, this reading is preferable.

## 6. KOLODNY'S OBJECTION

*Lucky and Unlucky:* “Consider Lucky and Unlucky, who occupy parallel universes. Each has an antique sitting on his front porch, which the rain threatens to ruin. A necessary means to saving the antique is taking a taxi back home. There is reason to refrain from taking the taxi; it costs money, say \$20. But this cost is outweighed by the value of the antique, say \$100. The only difference in their situations is that in Lucky’s universe, the rain will be slow in coming, and so he is very likely to get him home in time, if he takes the taxi: say that the probability is .9. In Unlucky’s universe, by contrast, he is extremely unlikely to get him home in time, even if he takes it: say .1” (Kolodny, forthcoming, §2).

- Kolodny maintains: Unlucky ought to save the antique, but it is not the case that he ought to take the taxi. Thus, we have a counterexample to TP.
- Kolodny’s argument relies on actualist assumptions, but it turns out that they aren’t necessary.
- Let us suppose that ‘ought’ depends on expectable rather than actual value; and let us suppose that saving the antique is in fact an option for both Lucky and Unlucky (even though they don’t know that, they would both be able to save the antique if they took the taxi).
- Perspectivist versions of actualism and possibilism entail that Unlucky ought not to take the taxi (the expected value of what could happen is outweighed by the cost of the taxi; the expected value of what would happen is not higher than that).
- However, actualism and possibilism also seem to entail that Unlucky ought to save the antique: both what *would* and what *could* happen if he saved the antique is expectably better than what would or could happen if he didn’t.
- Surprising result: Not only objective and prospective actualism, but also prospective possibilism falsify TP. Moreover, they all violate JS. As I’ve argued, this constitutes a *reductio* of these views.

*A fresh start:* A plausible perspectivist possibilism should be (1) compatible with JS, and it should entail that (2) Lucky ought to take the taxi and (3) Unlucky ought not to take the taxi, *whether or not they can in fact save the antique*.

*The holist approach:* A ought to  $\phi$  iff  $\phi$ -ing is part of every available maximal course of action that is expectably optimal.

→ satisfies JS, but yields the conclusion that Unlucky ought to take the taxi.

*The intentional holist approach:* A ought to  $\phi$  iff  $\phi$ -ing is part of every available maximal course of action such that *intending* to take that course is expectably optimal (cf. Zimmerman 2008).

→ yields the conclusion that Lucky ought not to take the taxi if he cannot in fact save the antique.

*A (tentative) proposal:* At  $t_1$ , A ought to  $\phi$  at  $t_2$  iff for every  $t$  between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , if A does what she ought to do at  $t$ , then at  $t_2$ ,  $\phi$ -ing at  $t_2$  is an option such that what could happen as a result of A’s exercising her agency if A  $\phi$ -s at  $t_2$  is expectably better than what could happen if A does not  $\phi$  at  $t_2$ .

→ In the synchronic case ( $t_1=t_2$ ), this is equivalent to the original view. It entails that at  $t_1$  (the time when the rain announces itself), Unlucky ought not to take the taxi at  $t_1$ .

→ In the diachronic case, its verdicts differ from the original view. Whether Unlucky ought at  $t_1$  to save the antique at  $t_2$  depends not on whether what could happen if he saves the antique is expectably better at  $t_1$ , but on whether this is expectably better at  $t_2$  if until  $t_2$

Unlucky does what he ought to. It follows that at  $t_1$ , it is not the case that Unlucky ought to save the antique.

→ This saves not only JS, but also TP. This seems to me the overall most plausible treatment of Kolodny's case.

## 7. FINALLY: AN ARGUMENT FOR THE TRANSMISSION PRINCIPLE

- I have rejected various counterexamples against TP on grounds that the arguments in question do not only threaten TP but also the fundamental principle that 'oughts' must be jointly satisfiable.
- This raises the question: is there an internal connection between JS and TP?
- Recall that the deliberative 'ought' is the 'ought' of what we have most reason to do.
- If JS holds, what truth about reasons explains that we can never have most reason to do what is incompatible with something else we have most reason to do? A natural explanation is that the following principle is true:

*Reason transmission (RT):* If R is a reason for A to  $\phi$ , and  $\psi$ -ing is an incompatible alternative to  $\phi$ -ing, then this provides an equally strong reason for A not to  $\psi$ .

*RT explains JS:*

- (1) You have most reason to  $\psi$  (assumption).
- (2) Therefore, your reasons to  $\psi$  are stronger than your reasons not to  $\psi$  (from 1).
- (3) Your reasons to  $\phi$  provide equally strong reasons not to  $\psi$  (by RT).
- (4) Therefore, your reasons to  $\psi$  are stronger than your reasons to  $\phi$  (from 2 and 3)
- (5) Your reasons to  $\psi$  provide equally strong reasons not to  $\phi$  (by RT).
- (6) Therefore, your reasons not to  $\phi$  are stronger than your reasons to  $\phi$  (from 4 and 5).
- (7) Therefore, you do not have most reason to  $\phi$  (from 6).

*But RT also entails TP:*

If  $\psi$ -ing is a necessary means to  $\phi$ -ing, then to refrain from  $\psi$ -ing is an incompatible alternative to  $\phi$ -ing. Therefore, all reasons to  $\phi$  provide equally strong reasons to  $\psi$ .<sup>1</sup>

I thus conclude with the following conjecture: *TP is entailed by the best explanation of JS in terms of reasons.*

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<sup>1</sup> (1) You have most reason to  $\phi$  (assumption).  
 (2)  $\psi$ -ing is a necessary means to  $\phi$ -ing (assumption).  
 (3) Therefore, to refrain from  $\psi$ -ing is an incompatible alternative to  $\phi$ -ing (from 2).  
 (4) Therefore, your reasons to refrain from  $\psi$ -ing provide equally strong reasons to refrain from  $\phi$ -ing  
 (5) and your reasons to  $\phi$  provide equally strong reasons not to refrain from  $\psi$ -ing (from 3 and RT).  
 (6) Therefore, your reasons to  $\phi$  provide equally strong reasons to  $\psi$  (from 4, by equivalence of reasons for actions and reasons against refrainings)  
 (7) Your reasons to  $\phi$  are stronger than your reasons to refrain from  $\phi$ -ing (from 1).  
 (8) Therefore, your reasons to  $\phi$  are stronger than your reasons to refrain from  $\psi$ -ing (from 4 and 7)  
 (9) Therefore, your reasons to  $\psi$  are stronger than your reasons to refrain from  $\psi$ -ing (from 6 and 8).  
 (10) Therefore, you have most reason to  $\psi$  (from 9).

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