

## *What's wrong with possibilism*

Christopher Woodard

1. Possibilists claim that what Smith ought to do now depends on two kinds of fact about relevant agents' responses to his action. If the relevant agent is a different individual, what Smith ought to do now depends on how that agent would respond. If the relevant agent is Smith himself, it depends instead on how he could best respond. Actualists deny this. They claim that, whether or not the relevant agent is Smith himself, what matters is how that agent would respond to the various things Smith could do now (Zimmerman 1996: Chapter 6). Unlike possibilists, actualists treat Smith and other agents symmetrically in this respect.

For example, suppose Smith has been asked to help at some important charity event next weekend. He must either accept or decline now, and if he accepts now, later he will face a choice of whether to help or not. Though next weekend he could help, as a matter of fact he would not, were he to accept now. The result of declining would be worse than that of accepting-and-helping, but better than that of accepting-and-not-helping. Suppose we know all this for certain.<sup>1</sup> Actualists conclude that Smith ought to decline, since that would have the best outcome of those available given the facts about how relevant agents would respond. Possibilists say that this lets Smith off the hook too easily (Zimmerman 1996: 193-5, 203-6). Despite his faults, they say, he ought to accept, since this would have the best outcome given the facts about how he could best respond. They do not disagree with actualists over any matter of plain fact about Smith's response – in particular, all sides agree that he could but would not help if he accepts. The parties to this dispute disagree instead about which facts about his response determine his obligations.

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<sup>1</sup> This case is modelled on that of Professor Procrastinate (Jackson and Pargetter 1986: 235). One might have at least two worries about the coherence of my example. (1) The coherence of 'certainly would not *X*' with 'could *X*'; (2) the coherence of '(sincerely) agrees to *X*' with 'knows in advance he would not *X*'. I shall set these worries aside here. Though relevant to a full treatment of the issues, they do not bear particularly on my claims. One can try to finesse (1) by considering cases in which the relevant prediction is not certain (though that makes intuitions harder to disentangle); and one can try to finesse (2) by leaving the agent's knowledge out of the picture, and considering things from an observer's point of view, as I shall do here.

Though possibilism has some appeal, it has strongly counterintuitive implications in some cases. For those with possibilist sympathies, however, the remedy is not to refine it. The trouble with possibilism is that it is defined as a view about obligations in the first place. Rather than continue to debate deontic logic, possibilists should frame their view as being about normative reasons for action instead.

2. First consider the strongly counterintuitive implications of possibilism as a view about obligations. For ease of discussion describe Smith's choice as being between  $A$  and  $\sim A$  now, and if he chooses  $A$  now subsequently as being between  $B$  and  $\sim B$ . His situation is represented in Figure 1.

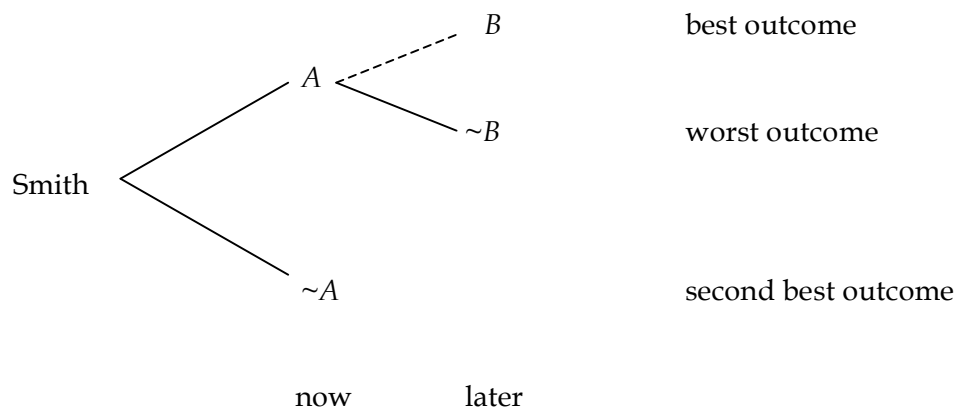


Figure 1. Smith's sequential choice

In this diagram the fact that Smith would not choose  $B$ , were he to choose  $A$ , is represented by the dashed line. This is a response he *could but would not* make. Possibilism tells us that, insofar as Smith's obligation to choose  $A$  or  $\sim A$  is concerned, such facts as that he would not choose  $B$  do not matter in the slightest.

The intuitive objection to possibilism is that it is very implausible that such facts should have no bearing at all on these obligations. This intuition perhaps comes more clearly into focus when the stakes are high. So imagine that the worst outcome would be not merely bad, but a moral disaster. The charity in our example would cease to exist, say, and this would result in enormous harm. If that doesn't seem like a genuine disaster, imagine something worse. No matter how high the stakes,

possibilism tells us to ignore facts such as that Smith would not choose *B* were he to choose *A* now. But it's very hard to believe that these facts do not affect Smith's obligation to choose *A* or  $\sim A$ . They seem among the most important features of his situation.

Possibilists could reply as follows. 'Of course these facts matter, even though they do not affect Smith's obligation to choose *A* or  $\sim A$ . Suppose he were to choose *A*, and then to choose  $\sim B$ . The crucial intuition we have to respect is that he has done something wrong. But we possibilists can explain this: he ought to have done (*A*&*B*), and he ought to have done *B*, and he failed to do these things. The fact you are worried about is significant for these issues, but not for the obligation to choose *A* or  $\sim A$ .' This is a good reply. It points out that facts such as that Smith would choose  $\sim B$  were he to choose *A* do not wear their significance on their sleeves. It's clear they matter somehow, but there is room for dispute about how exactly they matter. In light of that correct observation the possibilist can claim that their significance is confined to other issues.

However, we can press the intuitive objection against possibilism further by considering two other cases. In the first the structure of the situation is exactly as before, but the only interests at stake are Smith's. In purely prudential cases such as this, it may be harder to believe that the fact that he would choose  $\sim B$  were he to choose *A* is irrelevant to *whether he should choose A or not*. Imagine that *A* is 'buy a plane ticket', and *B* is 'board the plane'. Though Smith could board the plane, it so happens that he would not. It's hard to believe that this fact does not affect whether he ought, prudentially, to buy the ticket. Unless there is a sharp asymmetry between prudential and moral oughts regarding the bearing of such facts, this suggests that the parallel fact affects Smith's moral obligation to choose *A* or  $\sim A$  in our original example. If so, the possibilist's reply may look unconvincing.

Now consider a second parallel. Some hold views similar to possibilism about the responses of *other* agents. Rule Consequentialists, for example, claim that Smith's obligations depend on facts about how others could best respond, not facts about how they would respond. Consider the example shown in Figure 2 involving Smith and a different individual, Jones.

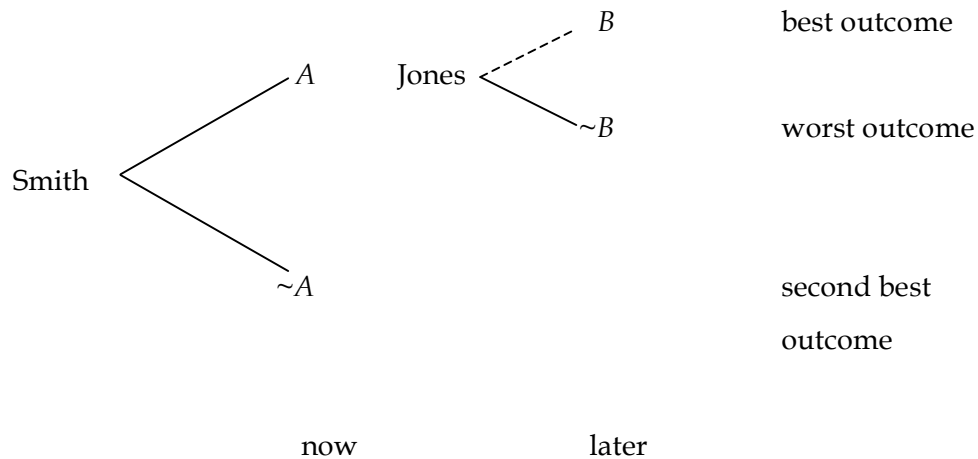


Figure 2. Smith's choice faced with Jones

Here the structure is as before, with the important difference that the later choice would be made by a different individual. We know that, were Smith to choose  $A$ , Jones could but would not choose  $B$ , and that choosing  $B$  would result in the best outcome.

Now consider what Rule Consequentialism implies about Smith's choice between  $A$  and  $\sim A$ . Suppose that  $A$  and  $B$  are both required by the optimal set of rules. In normal cases, Rule Consequentialism will imply that Smith ought to choose  $A$ , regardless of the fact that Jones would reply with  $\sim B$ . So far, this is parallel to what possibilists say about intrapersonal cases. However, all leading forms of Rule Consequentialism make some provision for exceptions when the stakes are very high. This may take the form of a disaster-prevention rule, or of some other device (Woodard 2008a). If the stakes are high enough, these forms of Rule Consequentialism will imply that Smith ought to choose  $\sim A$  because of the great harm this averts.

Only the very strictest deontologists would claim that facts about how other relevant agents would respond are *never* significant for what ought to be done now. Nozick is pretty uncompromising in his claims about rights, yet he takes the possibility of exceptions seriously when the stakes are high enough (1974: 29-30 note). As I've just pointed out, Rule Consequentialists typically allow for exceptions. In general, views about others' responses that run parallel with possibilism for normal cases tend to grant the significance, in exceptional cases, of facts about how relevant agents would respond. This striking fact puts further pressure on the possibilist's reply. Either some disanalogy between intrapersonal and interpersonal

cases makes the uncompromising view more plausible for intrapersonal cases, or Rule Consequentialism and other views allowing for exceptions are not uncompromising enough, or possibilism is too severe in its ignorance of facts about how the agent would respond to his own choices.

Possibilism has strongly counterintuitive implications. Its uncompromising stance on facts about how the agent would respond is very hard to accept, especially when the stakes are high.

3. Of course there is room for further debate about the intuitive objection to possibilism. But we can also make a different kind of argument against it, on the assumption that an agent's obligations depend entirely on his normative reasons for action. If that is correct we can translate the distinctive claims made by actualists and possibilists into claims about reasons. Doing this has two advantages. First, we can see that possibilism is a gratuitously extreme view. This gives us separate grounds for rejecting it than those at stake in the intuitive objection considered in §2. Second, we can see more clearly the character of the more moderate and plausible ways of denying actualism. The upshot is that those with possibilist sympathies should give up their traditional claims about deontic logic and occupy some more moderate position about the reasons underlying obligations.<sup>2</sup>

So let's try to translate possibilism and actualism into claims about reasons instead of obligations. Assume that an agent is obliged to do *X* just in case he has overall reason to do so. Call the agent whose reasons we're interested in 'the actor'. Then we can characterise actualism and possibilism using the following claims:

*Actualism.* To the extent that what the actor has overall reason to do depends on his own response, it depends on facts about how he would respond, and on no other fact about that response.

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<sup>2</sup> My claims are formulated in terms of the descent from talk of obligations to talk of reasons. However, the crucial point is really to descend from overall to contributory notions *somehow*. One could mark that shift in various ways. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out that one could mark it in terms of the distinction between all-things-considered obligations and pro tanto obligations, for example. For the purposes of this paper these different formulations should make only a verbal difference.

*Possibilism.* To the extent that what the actor has overall reason to do depends on his own response, it depends on facts about how he could best respond, and on no other fact about that response.

It's immediately obvious that these two claims do not jointly exhaust the logical options. Each selects one kind of fact about the actor's response, and claims that to the extent that his response matters, it is always this kind of fact that matters and no other. Views which claim either that sometimes one kind of fact matters, and other times another, or that in at least one case more than one kind of fact matters, are thus significant alternatives to both actualism and possibilism. Since they occupy the middle ground between actualism and possibilism, we can call all such views *moderate*.

Moderate views don't tend to feature in the traditional debate between actualists and possibilists.<sup>3</sup> They typically do not support the detachment rules for ought claims that possibilists endorse, such as that "'Smith ought to do (X&Y)" implies "Smith ought to do X"', since in at least some cases they imply that, because Smith would not do Y were he to do X, he ought not to do X. This means that from the perspective of the traditional debate moderate views may be hard to distinguish from actualism. However, when we consider their claims about reasons it's clear that they are significant departures from actualism. Moderates deny the central actualist claim that, if the actor's response matters, it is always how he would respond and no other fact about his response that matters. Of course, moderate views differ from possibilism too. In allowing that facts about how relevant agents could best respond sometimes but not always determine what there is most reason to do, they are structurally similar to those forms of Rule Consequentialism which make some provision for exceptional cases.

So far I've portrayed moderate views as symmetrically related to actualism and possibilism since they occupy a middle position between these two doctrines. However, though the availability of moderate views makes possibilism seem gratuitously extreme, it does not have the same effect on actualism. To see why, consider how a moderate view would work. It would have to recognise two kinds of

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<sup>3</sup> Vorobej's 'Prosaic Possibilism' is an exception, though it has the same implications about obligations as regular possibilism in almost all cases. And, as he admits (2000: 135), as compromises go it is 'somewhat *ad hoc*'.

reason for action, which we can call 'a-reasons' and 'p-reasons'. A-reasons depend on the responses the actor would make to the choice under consideration. P-reasons depend on the responses he could best make to the choice under consideration. Of course, actualists claim that there are no p-reasons, and possibilists claim that there are no a-reasons.<sup>4</sup> Moderates think that both kinds of reason exist. (*Pluralist* moderates think that both kinds of reason may exist in a single case.)

Given the availability of moderate views, possibilism seems gratuitously extreme while actualism does not because it is much more plausible to think that there are no p-reasons than to think that there are no a-reasons. A-reasons are homespun. They have to do with the way the world would be were the action in question performed. Thus they may reflect the action's causal properties or its intrinsic goodness or rightness. By comparison, p-reasons are exotic. They have to do with the way the world would be if the action *and at least one other action* were performed, and they are independent of facts about whether the other action or actions would be performed. For example, if Smith has a p-reason to accept the invitation to help it depends on the way the world would be were he to accept now and help later, and it is independent of the fact that he would not help later. That is, his reason to accept is simply that doing so is part of the best sequence or pattern he could perform. Thus p-reasons are quite different in character from a-reasons. They treat actions as parts, not as precursors. They do not depend on the action's causal properties or its intrinsic goodness or rightness, but instead on its parthood properties. Smith's reason to agree to help is that doing so is part of the best pattern of action he could perform, which is to accept-and-help.<sup>5</sup>

It's extremely implausible to deny that an action's causal properties can give rise to reasons for or against performing it. Denying this involves distancing ourselves from the common-sense view that at least a large part of the point of acting is to cause other things to happen. Of course, possibilism does not altogether ignore the causal properties of actions. It does so only insofar as the effect in question is the actor's own future action. With regard to the response of other parts of the actor's environment, possibilism agrees with actualism in focusing on causal or intrinsic properties and ignoring parthood properties. What's puzzling is that when it comes

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<sup>4</sup> Strictly, the claims are slightly more modest. Actualists deny that p-reasons ever affect what the actor has overall reason to do, while possibilists deny that a-reasons ever affect what he has overall reason to do. I will ignore this complication here.

<sup>5</sup> Here I develop a suggestion made by Jackson (1987: 106).

to the actor's own response, possibilists claim not only (1) that parthood properties matter, but also (2) that causal or intrinsic properties cease entirely to matter. Claim (2) just looks gratuitous. In contrast, actualism's across-the-board denial that parthood properties ever ground reasons simply amounts to taking a consistent line on a substantive issue. It contains no gratuitous elements.

In the debate over actualism the fundamental issue is whether the parthood properties of actions ever ground reasons, and if so, when. There's no need for actualism's opponents to rush to the extreme view that when parthood properties matter causal or intrinsic properties do not matter at all. So, shifting topic from obligations to reasons adds to the pressure on possibilism. Once we've noticed that the fundamental issue is whether parthood properties ever ground reasons, possibilism's extremely asymmetric treatment of reasons having to do with the actor's own response, on one hand, as compared with reasons having to do with the response of the rest of his environment, on the other, seems like a mere artefact of the way these issues happened to have been framed in the past.

Actualists hold the upper hand in the traditional debate because it is much more plausible to claim that parthood properties never matter than to claim, as the possibilist does, that they matter only in respect of the actor's own response, and that then they are always decisive. This peculiarity of the possibilist's position provides a reason to reject it that is independent of the appeal to intuitions about cases considered in §2. What's more, it helps to explain why possibilism's implications are so counter-intuitive when the stakes are high.

4. Framing the debate as being about reasons rather than obligations also has significant methodological advantages. First, it should make us wary of appealing to the wrong sort of intuition when discussing these issues. In particular, it should make us resistant to appeals to logical intuitions about the behaviour of the 'ought' operator, such as intuitions about detachment. The prime requirement on a satisfactory deontic logic is that it not distort the underlying practical reasons, just as a logic of belief had better not distort underlying epistemic reasons. So we'd do better to consider what reasons agents have than to think about the behaviour of the ought operator as such.

Second, shifting to talk about reasons highlights the really important unanswered questions for those with possibilist sympathies. For example, what



defence if any might we give of the idea that parthood properties can ground reasons? If they can ground reasons, under what circumstances can they do so? Can the patterns of action involved include actions by other agents – or only actions performable by the actor himself, as the possibilist claims? Must all agents involved be cooperatively disposed? How do reasons depending on parthood properties interact with other reasons? By giving up the debate in deontic logic, those with sympathies for possibilism can start to make headway on these hard questions.<sup>6</sup> Addressing them is likely to be more fruitful and interesting than any further search for arguments to shore-up possibilism as traditionally conceived.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss some of them in Woodard (2008b).

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Jonathan Way, Guy Fletcher, and Brian McElwee for discussion.

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