Against Securitism, the New Breed of Actualism in Consequentialist Thought

2013 Meeting of the New Mexico-West Texas Philosophical Society
Jean-Paul Vessel  jvessel@nmsu.edu
New Mexico State University

1. Consequentialism, Actualism, and Possibilism

**Consequentialism**: Family of ethical theories that share this feature: the normative status of an act, \( A \), (the rightness, wrongness, or obligatoriness of \( A \)) is determined by the consequences of \( A \) as well as by the consequences of \( A \)’s alternatives.

Disputes between actualists and possibilists focus upon cases involving extended plans of action available to agents, cases like these: promising to assist someone in the future and then assisting her when the time comes, commits oneself to work on a long term project and then following through with the work required by the project. Trouble between the two camps emerges when we consider specific cases of these extended plans of action. In such cases, these plans are the best possible routes of action available to some agent but are such that starting these plans without finishing them results in the worst for the world. Now consider a subset of these cases, cases in which regardless of whether the agent in question starts the plan by promising or committing himself to whatever it requires, he simply will not follow through with it because of some moral vice he instantiates from the beginning or develops prior to completion of the plan. The actual fact that such agents simply will not do the best they can for the world by committing themselves to a best possible plan of action and then carrying it out serves as the source of controversy between the two camps.

**Possibilists**: those who believe that we should always pursue a “best” possible course of action available to us

**Actualists**: those who believe that certain future facts about what agents simply will not do in the actual world (as well as in nearby “would-be” worlds) can generate obligations incompatible with the best possible course of action available to us

2. The Original “Procrastinate” Case

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 say ‘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 or anything like that, 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, or at least to a review being seriously delayed.
Should Procrastinate accept the invitation to review the book? Or if we suppose that he in fact declines—perhaps because he knows that he would not get around to writing the review—did he do the right thing in declining?

According to Possibilism, the fact that Procrastinate would not write the review were he to say ‘yes’ is irrelevant. What matters is simply what is possible for Procrastinate. He can say ‘yes’ and then write, that is best; that requires inter alia that he say ‘yes’; therefore, he ought to say ‘yes’. According to Actualism, the fact that Procrastinate would not actually write the review were he to say ‘yes’ is crucial. It means that to say ‘yes’ would be in fact to realize the worst. Therefore, Procrastinate ought to say ‘no’.

O(A & W), where

A: Procrastinate accepts the invitation to write the review.

W: Procrastinate writes the review in timely manner.

SC: A □→ ¬W (If Procrastinate were to accept the invitation to write the review, then it would not be the case that Procrastinate writes the review.)

Given the fact that Procrastinate simply will not write the review even if he were to accept the invitation to do so—and this is something that Procrastinate knows about himself—actualists believe that he should decline the invitation. The fact that it would be better if Procrastinate were to decline the invitation than it would be for him to accept it and then fail to write the review has influenced traditional actualists to reject the claim that Procrastinate is obligated to accept the invitation. In virtue of the truth of SC above, the best wouldn’t be brought about were Procrastinate to accept the invitation. Thus, actualists believe that while $O(A \& W)$ is true, $O(A)$ is false—entailing their rejection of the following principle:

DC: $O(a \& b) \implies O(a) \& O(b)$

The principle states that for any acts (or any bearers of normative status) $a$ and $b$, if it is obligatory for a specific agent to do the conjunctive (or compound) act $a \& b$, then that agent is obligated to do $a$ and is also obligated to do $b$—the deontic operator of obligation distributes over conjunction.

CO: $O(\sim A/\sim W)$,

where $O(\sim A/\sim W)$ is read It is obligatory that $\sim A$ given $\sim W$. Procrastinate is conditionally obligated to make $\sim A$ true. Some actualists (contra possibilists) also seem to believe that factual detachment for conditional obligation is valid—that from $O(\sim A/\sim W)$ and $\sim W$ we can infer $O(\sim A)$. But it isn’t.

3. Securitism

Let “α$_i$” and “α$_j$” be variables that range over sets of actions.

Let a schedule of intentions extending over a time-interval, $T$, be a function from times in $T$ to sets of intentions.

An agent’s intentions follow a certain schedule of intentions, $I$, extending over $T$ just in case, for every time $t_i$ belonging to $T$, the agent has at $t_i$ all and only the intentions that $I$ specifies for $t_i$. 

An agent carries out an intention to perform $\alpha_i$ if and only if she performs $\alpha_i$.

A set of actions, $\alpha_j$, is, as of $t_i$, personally possible for S if and only if there is some schedule of intentions, $I$, extending over a time-interval, $T$, beginning at $t_i$ such that the following are all true: (a) if S’s intentions followed schedule, $I$, then S would carry out all the intentions in $I$; (b) S’s carrying out all the intentions in $I$ would involve S’s performing $\alpha_j$; (c) S has just before $t_i$ the capacity to continue, or to come, to have the intentions that $I$ specifies for $t_i$; and (d) for any time $t_j$ in $T$ after $t_i$ ($t_i < t_j$) if S’s intentions followed $I$ up until $t_j$, then S would have just before $t_j$ the capacity to continue, or to come, to have the intentions that $I$ specifies for $t_j$.

A set of actions, $\alpha_j$, is, as of $t_i$, scrupulously securable by S if and only if there is a time, $t_j$, that either immediately follows $t_i$ or is identical to $t_i$, a set of actions, $\alpha_i$ (where $\alpha_j$ may, or may not, be identical to $\alpha_i$), and a set of background attitudes, $B$, such that the following are all true: (1) S would perform $\alpha_j$ if S were to have at $t_j$ both $B$ and the intention to perform $\alpha_i$; (2) S has at $t_i$ the capacity to continue, or to come, to have at $t_j$ both $B$ and the intention to perform $\alpha_i$; and (3) S would continue, or come, to have at $t_j$ $B$ (and where $\alpha_j$ is not identical to $\alpha_i$, the intention to perform $\alpha_i$ as well) if S both were at $t_i$ aware of all the relevant reason-constituting facts and were at $t_j$ to respond to these facts/reasons in all and only the ways that they prescribe, thereby coming to have at $t_j$ all those attitudes that, given those facts, she has decisive reason to have and only those attitudes that she has, given those facts, sufficient reason to have.

“First, by “attitudes,” I mean to be referring to only a subclass of attitudes—namely, judgment-sensitive attitudes, which are those attitudes that are sensitive to one’s judgments about reasons. These are the attitudes that an ideally rational agent would come to have whenever she judges that there are decisive reasons to have them and that an ideally rational agent would cease to have whenever she judges that there are insufficient reasons to have them. Judgments-sensitive attitudes include attitudes such as fear, desire, belief, and admiration.” (Portmore 2011: 166f.)

Securitism: It is, as of $t_i$, objectively rationaly permissible for S to perform a non-maximal set of actions, $\alpha_j$, beginning at $t_j$ ($t_i < t_j$) if and only if, and because, at least one of the objectively rationaly permissible maximal sets of actions are, as of $t_i$, scrupulously securable by S involves S’s performing $\alpha_j$.

4. Portmore’s Revised “Procrastinate” Case

Professor Procrastinate: Professor Procrastinate receives at $t_1$ an invitation to review a book. He is the best person to do the review and has the time to do it. The best thing for him and for others would be if he accepts the invitation at $t_2$, starts writing the review when the book arrives, and finishes the review by $t_8$. The second best thing for him and for others would be if he accepts the invitation at $t_2$ and then never writes the review, and this is what would in fact happen were he to accept the invitation at $t_2$. Assume, then, that although Professor Procrastinate’s accepting the invitation at $t_2$ and then writing the review at $t_8$ is, as of $t_1$, personally possible for him, it is not, as of $t_1$, scrupulously securable by him. That is, there is, as of $t_1$, nothing that he can do or intend to do that would ensure that he accepts the invitation at $t_2$ and then writes the review at $t_8$. No matter how resolute he is at $t_1$
in his intention to write the review at \( t_8 \), he will end up forever procrastinating, thereby failing to ever write the review.

I: At \( t_1 \), Procrastinate intends to accept the invitation to write the review at \( t_2 \) and complete the review by \( t_8 \).

A_\text{P}: Procrastinate accepts the invitation to write the review at \( t_2 \).

W_\text{P}: Procrastinate writes the review by \( t_8 \).

SC2: \((I \text{ and } A_\text{P}) \Box \rightarrow \neg W_\text{P}\) (If it were the case that at \( t_1 \), Procrastinate intends to accept the invitation to write the review at \( t_2 \) and complete the review by \( t_8 \), and Procrastinate accepts the invitation to write the review at \( t_2 \), then it would not be the case that Procrastinate writes the review by \( t_8 \).)

The final central assumption of the case is that Procrastinate knows that \( SC2 \) is true. He knows himself well enough to know that even if he intends to write the review and accepts the invitation to do so, he simply won’t. He’ll procrastinate instead. Furthermore, such knowledge is a member of Procrastinate’s set of permissible background attitudes, and all of Procrastinate’s background attitudes are assumed to be permissible.

A preliminary problem immediately rears its head. Suppose that Procrastinate accepts the invitation. Given the other assumptions of the case, is the scenario coherently described? Is it a genuine possibility? Given that Procrastinate knows that \( SC2 \) is true, how can he sincerely intend to complete the review by \( t_8 \)? Can a person coherently and sincerely intend to do something he knows he won’t do? It seems unlikely, and if it is, Portmore’s notions of scrupulous securability and being under one’s deliberative control are incoherent too. But let’s see what results from granting them coherence.

Given the truth of \( SC2 \) and the fact that Procrastinate knows it to be true, securitism implies that it is rationally (and morally) impermissible for Procrastinate to accept the invitation at \( t_2 \): The compound act of accepting the invitation at \( t_2 \) and then writing the review by \( t_8 \) simply isn’t scrupulously securable by Procrastinate at \( t_1 \). It isn’t within Procrastinate’s “deliberative control” at \( t_1 \). The truth of \( SC2 \) combined with the fact that Procrastinate knows it to be true (with complete rationality) entails that the first condition in the definition of ‘scrupulously securable’ is not met.

\[(1) \quad \text{S would perform } \alpha_i \text{ if S were to have at } t_j \text{ both [a permissible set of background attitudes] } B \text{ and the intention to perform } \alpha_i. \]

Securitism is a form of actualism, for it implies that the future fact that Procrastinate will not write the review in the actual world as well as in nearby “would-be” worlds—even though he can—generates obligations incompatible with the best possible course of action available to him.

SC3: \((I \text{ and } A_\text{P}) \Box \rightarrow W_\text{P}\)

5. Implications of Securitism

Portmore-style securitists believe that obligation and permissibility distribute over conjunction, and they believe that Procrastinate is morally excused from pursuing an arduous but attractive line of action
that is both best for himself and best for others in virtue of the fact that he either instantiates a vice at \( t_1 \) or develops one sometime prior to \( t_8 \). In a wide range of cases, securitism entails that the vicious are morally excused from exerting the effort required to pursue the best available courses of action for themselves and for others. The virtuous, on the other hand, are almost always required to sacrifice whatever is necessary to pursue the best available courses of action available to them. Securitism entails that morality is much more demanding for the virtuous than it is for the vicious in a wide range of cases. I find this implication of securitism unacceptable.

6. Against Securitism

Suppose that Procrastinate recognizes at \( t_1 \) that accepting the invitation and writing the review on time is what’s best both for him and for others, so he accepts the invitation with the intention of following the schedule of intentions, \( I \). In order for the subjunctive conditional above (SC2) to be true, there must be some time, \( t \), after \( t_2 \) at which Procrastinate veers off the schedule of intentions, \( I \), and procrastinates instead. (I’m imagining this happening in the actual world, but it occurs in all the closest relevant “accepts the invitation”-would-be-worlds as well.) Note that the fact that Procrastinate veers off \( I \) is not unalterable at \( t_8 \) or any time before: Procrastinate has the ability and available intention to resist his temptation to veer off \( I \); it’s just that he won’t. He can resist it but instead succumbs to it. Why? Perhaps it requires more effort to resist the temptation than Procrastinate is willing to expend at the time. Regardless, just before or at the time Procrastinate veers off \( I \), Procrastinate develops an intention that he ought not to have, one incompatible with what \( I \) prescribes at the time. This appears to be a serious point.

Note that just before Procrastinate veers off \( I \) in the closest relevant “accepts the invitation”-worlds, the next act that \( I \) prescribes for Procrastinate is scrupulously securable by him. He can perform it; he has decisive reason to perform it; it’s just that he decides to do otherwise because of some morally unattractive feature of his psychology.

The truth of the subjunctive conditional above (SC2), then, is due to a flaw in Procrastinate’s moral character. On securitism, having a faulty moral character can excuse a person from doing what’s best for herself and for others. According to securitism, the vicious—those who embody the vices of laziness, rashness, intemperance, prodigality, excessive selfishness, cowardice, pettiness, etc.—are morally excused from doing what morality requires of the virtuous in a wide range of cases. Once the relevant vicious dispositions are sufficiently developed, subjunctive conditionals like \( SC2 \) will be true. Due to their vicious natures, vicious people can then take comfort in the fact that even if they were to intend to pursue a morally attractive but arduous line of action, they wouldn’t see it through to completion, just because they would rather do something less demanding instead, and thus are morally excused from such lines of action on securitism. Securitism entails that morality is much more demanding for the virtuous than it is for the vicious: The virtuous would expend whatever effort were required to resist immoral temptations; the vicious would not, and—in many cases—are thus excused from doing so.

Consider Portmore’s “Procrastinate” case once more. Either Procrastinate has a vice (for which he is responsible) at \( t_1 \) or develops it by \( t_8 \) and is justified in believing that he’ll develop it by then. Suppose the former, that (i) Procrastinate has a vice at \( t_1 \), (ii) Procrastinate is justified in believing that he’ll continue to have the vice throughout \( t_8 \) (even though he can start shedding it), and (iii) Procrastinate is justified in believing that he will succumb to his vice sometime prior to \( t_8 \) even though he can resist doing so. Given these suppositions, Procrastinate meeting his moral obligations on securitism by declining the invitation just seems morally ugly—so, so far from saintly. Why? Because Procrastinate recognizes the (vicious) similarity between himself at \( t_1 \) and his future self sometime prior
to $t_5$, thereby morally excusing himself from doing what’s best for himself and for others according to securitism. It seems to me that at $t_1$, Procrastinate ought either to be shedding his vice or refraining from developing one. He ought to be doing the same at $t_2$, at $t_3$, and so on.

I think possibilism generates the right results in these cases and that there are strong asymmetries between our future selves and others. I endorse the following position: In regular cases (those without evil demons, counterfactual manipulators, etc.), my present self is morally responsible the moral character of my future self at the next relevant interval of time. For example, at $t_1$, I am responsible for the moral character of myself at the next relevant point in time, $t_2$. At $t_2$, I am responsible for the moral character of myself at the next relevant point in time, $t_3$, and so on. This “formation of moral character” position suggests that there is a strong asymmetry between how we should reason about how our future selves would behave and how the future selves of others would behave. And of course there are other differences as well: We can (morally) commit our future selves to various tasks that we can’t commit the future selves of others to, and our future selves may be morally burdened by our present selves if our present selves are sufficiently vicious. Note also that in most cases, our future selves (especially our future selves in the relevantly near future) are incredibly similar to our present selves, evidencing another asymmetry.

7. Conclusion

Securitism is in some ways theoretically superior to traditional forms of actualism. It avoids the problem of incompatible obligations and is more strict than traditional actualist views in that the subjunctive conditionals relevant to its actualist implications have “stronger” antecedents than those relevant to traditional actualist implications. Nonetheless, securitism fails to reflect the true nature of consequentialist morality, because in a wide range of cases it implies that people are morally excused from doing what’s best both for themselves and for others in light of vices they instantiate or will instantiate in the future. Furthermore, securitism seemingly implausibly implies that morality is radically more demanding for the virtuous than it is for the vicious.

Possibilism suffers from no such flaws, but traditional forms of possibilism have problems of their own. Sometimes the best possible outcome available to someone is such that were she to attempt to secure that outcome she would most likely fail (due to no fault of her own or her future selves) and thereby secure the worst possible outcome instead. So perhaps subjunctive conditionals (or at least subjunctive conditional probabilities) are required in the formulation of the most plausible consequentialist theory. Even so, I have argued elsewhere that such conditionals should be interpreted in a possibilist manner. Notice that the consequent of each of the subjunctive conditionals in the discussion above is a proposition about a future immoral act (in the actual or nearby “would-be” worlds) that Procrastinate can refrain from performing. I have argued that when an agent’s act is under evaluation, her future moral failures and all of the events causally resulting from such failures simply should not register as relevant features to the semantics of the types of subjunctive conditionals under discussion here. Perhaps securitism can be saved, so long as the subjunctive conditional in clause (1) of the definition of ‘scrupulously securable’ in interpreted in a possibilist rather than actualist manner. Until then, possibilist moral saints—those who always engage in morally permissible lines of actions—will remain unspeakably more beautiful than their securitist counterparts.