Against Securitism, the New Breed of Actualism in Consequentialist Thought

1. Introduction

In his recent book *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality*, Douglas Portmore introduces a novel position—securitism—regarding the actualist-possibilist controversies in consequentialist thought, a position he argues is theoretically superior to the traditional views in both the actualist and possibilist camps. After distinguishing the two camps through an examination of the original “Procrastinate” case, I will present Portmore’s securitism (a new species of actualism) and its implications regarding his modified “Procrastinate” case. I will then level a series of objections against securitism before arguing that a possibilist variant of the securitist view isn’t susceptible to such objections and thus appears theoretically superior to the actualist version Portmore promotes.

2. Actualism, Possibilism, and the Original “Procrastinate” Case

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, committing 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\(^1\)—those who believe we should always pursue a "best" possible course of action available to us\(^2\)—dismiss such facts as irrelevant. Actualists\(^3\)—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—obviously rate such facts of utmost importance. Jackson and Pargetter's original "Procrastinate" case should further elucidate the differences between the two camps.

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'.\(^{4,5}\)


\(^2\) A "best" possible course of action available to an agent at a time is one than which no other course of action available to the agent at the time is better.


\(^4\) Jackson and Pargetter (1986). This case is structurally similar to the "Journal Referee" case in Thomason (1981), the "Jack and Jill" case in Carlson (1999), the "Fran and Stan"
Most consequentialists believe that we morally ought to bring about the Best.\footnote{Satisficing consequentialists are the exception to the norm. They don't believe that we are required to bring about the best; rather, we are merely required to do that which is "good enough." Slote (1984) and Slote (1989) are paradigm satisficers. Hurka (1990) seems sympathetic to satisficing versions of certain subjective forms of consequentialism. Critics of satisficing versions of consequentialism include Pettit (1984), Mulgan (1993), Bradley (2006), and Author (XXXX).} When considering the extended plan of action available to Procrastinate—accepting the invitation to write the review and then working on the review until it is completed in a timely manner—both possibilists and traditional actualists\footnote{Note that Portmore (2011) is a new breed of actualist and rejects the following conjunctive obligation claim.} endorse the following obligation claim:

\[ O(A \& W), \] where

\[ A: \text{ Procrastinate accepts the invitation to write the review.} \]
\[ W: \text{ Procrastinate writes the review in timely manner.} \]

Accepting the invitation and then writing the review on time is the best Procrastinate can do for the world here, so it seems that he is morally obligated to do both. Possibilists and traditional actualists agree about this. But the actualists view the situation as much more complicated. The truth of the following subjunctive conditional gives traditional actualists pause.

\[ SC: \quad A \square \rightarrow \sim W \text{ (If Procrastinate were to accept the invitation to write the review, then it would not be the case that Procrastinate writes the review.)} \]
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:

\[
DC: \quad O(a \& b) \quad \Rightarrow \quad O(a) \& O(b)
\]

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. Possibilists endorse the principle as true; consistency seems to require it. Traditional actualists\(^9\) reject it for the reasons given above and thus strap themselves with seemingly serious and perhaps even insurmountable theoretical problems.\(^11\)

The central difficulty traditional actualists foist upon themselves is a problem of incompatible obligations.\(^12\) If \( O(A \& W) \) is true, then it seems that Procrastinate ought to see to it that \( A \) is true. But if Procrastinate were to make \( A \) true, then he would make \( W \) false. And because seeing to the truth of both \( \sim A \) and \( \sim W \) is better than seeing to the truth of both \( A \) and \( \sim W \), actualists contend that it’s not the case that Procrastinate ought

\(^9\) Zimmerman (1996) and Author (XXXX) believe that the moral relevance (or lack thereof) of subjunctive conditionals like \( SC \) lies at the core of the dispute between the actualists and possibilists.

\(^10\) Note that Portmore (2011) also endorses the principle.

\(^11\) Curiously, Carlson (1999), a writer who rejects DC, believes that the act consisting of Procrastinate accepting the invitation to write the review lacks normative status while the act consisting of Procrastinate declining the invitation comes out morally wrong. For details, see §1 of his (1999).

\(^12\) Cf. §6.2.1 of Zimmerman’s (1996) where Zimmerman presents a list of principles that actualists are committed to rejecting.
to make $A$ true. So which is it? Ought Procrastinate to accept the invitation to write the review or not? Traditional actualists seem to be in a bit of a bind here.

Distinctions have been introduced to disarm the problem: primary vs. secondary obligations,\textsuperscript{13} unrestricted vs. restricted obligations,\textsuperscript{14} etc. Perhaps Procrastinate has a primary obligation to see to it that $A \& W$ is true, but because he won’t make $W$ true—regardless of what he commits himself to doing—a secondary obligation to see to the truth of $\neg A$ is generated. But problems remain. Are primary obligations more important than secondary obligations?\textsuperscript{15} Can we ever be justified in failing to do our primary duties by attending to our secondary duties? And if so, then how? And if not, then it seems that our primary duties are the only ones we really ought to be worried about fulfilling. Thus, the problem of incompatible obligations remains. What \textit{ought} Procrastinate to do? Traditional actualists don’t appear to have an acceptable response to this question. But possibilists \textit{do!}\textsuperscript{16}

Note that both camps believe the following statement of \textit{conditional obligation} to be true:

$$O(\neg A/\neg W),$$

where $O(\neg A/\neg W)$ is read \textit{It is obligatory that} $\neg A$ \textit{given} $\neg W$. Procrastinate is conditionally obligated to make $\neg A$ true. And—as we have seen—some actualists (contra possibilists)

\textsuperscript{13} McKinsey (1979) suggests that there are different “levels” of obligation that will disarm the problem of so-called incompatible obligations.

\textsuperscript{14} Jackson and Pargetter (1986) claim that something may be deemed obligatory in light of a certain set of options, but should that set of options be reduced to a smaller set, different—in fact incompatible—obligations might emerge. Apparently, Jackson and Pargetter (1986) believe that in certain situations, what we actually ought to do is behave in accordance with the obligations generated by the smaller sets, and that this somehow disarms the problem of incompatible obligations. We might call ‘restricted obligations’ those that are generated by the smaller, restricted sets of options.

\textsuperscript{15} McKinsey (1979) seems to believe that obligations of different levels are \textit{equally} important:

By saying that an obligation is secondary (or tertiary, or $n$-ary, where $n>1$), I do not mean that it is any \textit{less} of an obligation than a primary one. In my view, it is just as incumbent upon a person to fulfill his secondary obligations, as it is incumbent upon him to fulfill his primary ones. (391)

\textsuperscript{16} See chapter 6 of Zimmerman’s (1996). Author (XXXX) presents a consistent possibilist approach to this matter and also shows how possibilism has the resources to illustrate why some are pulled the (traditional) actualist way.
also seem to believe that factual detachment for conditional obligation is valid—that from \( O(\neg A/\neg W) \) and \( \neg W \) we can infer \( O(\neg A) \). But it isn’t.\(^{17}\) I suspect that traditional actualists either have mistaken the conditional obligatoriness of \( \neg A \) for obligatoriness \textit{simpliciter},\(^{18}\) have confused unconditional primary obligations with unconditional subsidiary obligations, or have illegitimately inferred \( O(\neg A) \) from \( O(\neg A/\neg W) \) and \( \neg W \) via factual detachment for conditional obligation.\(^{19}\) Either way presents seemingly insurmountable problems.

3. Securitism—The New Breed of Actualism

In his excellent book \textit{Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality}, Douglas Portmore recognizes many of the problems plaguing traditional actualism, plus he endorses the thesis that the deontic operators of obligation and permissibility distribute over conjunction, so he rejects traditional actualism.\(^{20}\) But Portmore is no possibilist either. Instead, he promotes a novel view—securitism—the new breed of actualism in consequentialist thought. Securitism is a very complex and carefully articulated view. In this section, I will present securitism and explications of all of its constituting concepts before illustrating its implications in Portmore’s modified “Procrastinate” case.\(^{21}\)

Let “\( \alpha_i \)” and “\( \alpha_j \)” be variables that range over sets of actions. Let a \textit{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

\(^{17}\) Arguments establishing the invalidity of factual detachment for conditional obligation and for the validity of a modified version of the factual detachment rule can be found in Greenspan’s (1978): 81-82, Humberstone’s (1983): 20-23, Feldman’s (1986): 90-92, Chapter 4 of Zimmerman’s (1996) where Zimmerman argues that if it were valid, acting morally would be “ridiculously easy”, and Author (XXXX). Note that if Procrastinate were unable to alter the truth value of \( \neg W \), then \( O(\neg A) \) could be legitimately inferred from \( O(\neg A/\neg W) \) and \( \neg W \). But Procrastinate could alter the truth value of \( \neg W \); it’s just that he won’t, because he’s a procrastinator.

\(^{18}\) Feldman also believes that this might be at the root of the disagreement between actualists and possibilists; see his (1986): 53-55.

\(^{19}\) Arguments for this diagnosis are presented in Author (XXXX).

\(^{20}\) See especially chapters 6 and 7.

\(^{21}\) The following definitions are taken virtually verbatim from Portmore (2011): 165ff.
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 $\alpha_i$. With these concepts in hand, an explication of the concept of what is personally possible for an agent at a time (or what an agent can do at a time) can be provided.

A set of actions, $\alpha_i$, 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 $\alpha_i$; (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 $t_j$.

Accepting the invitation to write the review and then completing it in a timely fashion is personally possible for Procrastinate. Possibilists believe we are morally required to pursue best courses of action personally possible for us; thus, they believe Procrastinate is morally required to accept the invitation and then write the review in a timely manner. Portmore disagrees. He believes the class of courses of actions we are morally required to pursue to be substantially smaller than the class of best courses of action personally possible for us. Portmore believes “that ‘ought’ implies not only ‘personally possible,’ but also ‘scrupulously securable.’” Here is Portmore’s explication of the concept of what is scrupulously securable by an agent at a time:

A set of actions, $\alpha_i$, 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 $\alpha_i$ 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 $\alpha_i$ 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

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22 Portmore borrows these definitions from Ross (Forthcoming).
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 \( \alpha_i \) is not identical to \( \alpha_j \), 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.\(^{25}\)

The concept of scrupulous securability is very complex, and some remarks concerning the nature of background attitudes should prove useful in attempts to grasp the concept. Portmore describes such attitudes in this way:

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 (Scanlon 1998, p. 20). 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.\(^{26}\)

Here is securitism, Portmore’s novel view relevant to the actualist-possibilist disputes:

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

According to securitism, acts available to us are objectively rationally (and morally) permissible for us to perform if and only if such acts are contained in subsets of scrupulously securable maximal sets of actions available to us. In his modified “Procrastinate” case, Portmore distinguishes his securitist position from possibilism and traditional actualism. Here’s the case:

\(^{25}\) Portmore (2011): 166f. For ease of explication, Portmore assumes counterfactual determinism here: the view that for any event, \( e \), “there is some determinate fact as to what the world would be like if \( e \) were to occur,” but Portmore isn’t committed to the view and illustrates how his definition should be emended if counterfactual determinism is false. For arguments against counterfactual determinism, see Ayer (1972): 116; Lewis (1973): 18, 21, 79-83; Stalnaker (1984: 164f), and Author (XXXX).

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 declines the invitation at \( t_2 \). The worst 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.\(^{27}\)

Consider these propositions relevant to the case; their truth values are unknown to us:

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

\( A_P \): Procrastinate accepts the invitation to write the review at \( t_2 \).

\( W_P \): Procrastinate writes the review by \( t_8 \).

Note the key assumptions in Portmore’s new “Procrastinate” case. Just as in the original case, accepting the invitation and then writing the review is personally possible for Procrastinate at \( t_1 \); he can do both. It’s just that he won’t write the review regardless of what he intends or commits himself to, so the following subjunctive conditional is true:

\( SC2: \) (I and \( A_P \) \( \square \rightarrow \sim W_P \) (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

\(^{27}\) This is a slightly altered version of the case presented in Portmore (2011): 180.
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 secularity 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.

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

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. But securitism’s implications in many of these kinds of cases differ from those of traditional forms of actualism. There is a sense in which securitism is more strict than traditional actualist views. Notice that the antecedent of the subjunctive conditional in Portmore’s case (\( SC2 \)) is “stronger” than that of the subjunctive conditional relevant to the original “Procrastinate” case (\( SC \)).

\[^{28}\text{The brackets are mine but are justified by the third condition in Portmore’s definition of ‘scrupulously securable’}.\]
SC: \[ A_P \Box \to \sim W_P \]

SC2: \[ (I \land A_P) \Box \to \sim W_P \]

SC could be true under circumstances in which Procrastinate simply wouldn’t intend to write the review even if he were to accept the invitation to do so, so it’s possible for SC to be true and SC2 to be false. The truth of SC2 conjoined with Procrastinate’s rational belief that SC2 is true morally excuses Procrastinate from accepting the invitation and then writing the review according to securitism. If SC2 were false, and if this subjunctive conditional were true,

SC3: \[ (I \land A_P) \Box \to W_P \]

then securitism would entail that Procrastinate morally ought to accept the invitation at \( t_2 \) and then complete the review by \( t_8 \). This is an implication securitism doesn’t share with traditional actualists who prioritize the “weaker” truth SC.

Recall that traditional actualists are torn by these cases. On the one hand, they believe that Procrastinate ought to accept the invitation and then write the review on time, because that is the best Procrastinate can do both for himself and for others. But on the other hand, actualists believe that Procrastinate ought not to accept the invitation given the facts that he won’t write the review and wouldn’t write it even if he were to accept an invitation to do so, leading to their difficulties regarding whether obligation and permissibility distribute over conjunction.

Portmore-style securitists aren’t torn. They 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. I pursue this objection further in the next section.

4. Against Securitism

I just claimed that securitism entails that Procrastinate is morally excused from accepting the invitation at \( t_2 \) and writing the review by \( t_8 \) in virtue of the fact that he either instantiates a vice at \( t_1 \) or develops one sometime prior to \( t_8 \). Furthermore, as supposed in the case, Procrastinate knows this to be true. Here’s an argument to support the claim.

In virtue of the fact that the “accepting invitation/writing review on time” set of actions is personally possible for Procrastinate at \( t_1 \), it follows that there is a schedule of intentions, \( I \), beginning at \( t_1 \) such that (i) Procrastinate’s following \( I \) involves Procrastinate both accepting the invitation at \( t_2 \) and writing the review by \( t_8 \), (ii) Procrastinate has the capacity to continue, or to come, to have the intentions that \( I \) specifies for \( t_1 \), and (iii) for all times \( t_1 - t_8 \), if Procrastinate’s intentions followed \( I \) up until \( t_8 \), then Procrastinate would have just before \( t_8 \) the capacity to continue, or to come, to have the intentions that \( I \) specifies for \( t_8 \). So, there is schedule of intentions, \( I \), available to Procrastinate at \( t_1 \) such that Procrastinate has the ability at the relevant times to perform each act that \( I \) prescribes.

Now recall the subjunctive conditional whose truth entails that even though it is personally possible for Procrastinate to do what’s best both for himself and for others he simply won’t do it.

\[
\text{SC2: (I and } A_P) \square \rightarrow \sim W_P \text{ (If it were the case that at } t_1, \text{ Procrastinate intends to accept the invitation to write the review at } t_2 \text{ and complete the review by } t_8, \text{ and Procrastinate accepts the invitation to write the review at } t_2, \text{ then it would not be the case that Procrastinate writes the review by } t_8.)
\]

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

\[29\] A sketch of this objection to securitism was originally presented in Author (XXXX).
conditional above 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 \( t_8 \), 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.

Portmore responds to this sort of argument by claiming that our future selves should be treated in ways symmetrical to the ways we treat others, especially when our present intentions cannot secure that our future selves will act in morally attractive ways.\(^{30}\) But it is in virtue of the similarity between Procrastinate at \( t_1 \) and his future self sometime prior to \( t_8 \)—both are procrastinators—that securitism implies that Procrastinate should decline the invitation at \( t_1 \). Securitism seems to backfire in these kinds of cases.

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

\(^{30}\) Portmore (2011): 210f.
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.

5. 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.31 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 and 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.32 Notice that the consequent of each of the subjunctive conditionals in the discussion above is a proposition describing a future immoral act (in the actual or nearby “would-be” worlds) that Procrastinate can refrain from doing. 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

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31 See Author (XXXX) and chapters 6 and 7 of Portmore (2011).
32 Author (XXXX).
discussion here. Perhaps securitism can be saved, so long as the subjunctive conditional in clause (1) of the definition of ‘scrupulously securable’ is 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.

References


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