

Defending a Possibilist Insight in Consequentialist Thought

There is a heated dispute among consequentialists concerning the following deontic principle:

$$\text{DC: } O(\underline{a} \ \& \ \underline{b}) \quad \rightarrow \quad O(\underline{a}) \ \& \ O(\underline{b})$$

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. Possibilists¹—those who believe that we should always pursue a “best” possible course of action available to us²—accept the principle as true. Actualists³—those who believe that certain future facts about the actual world can generate obligations incompatible with the best possible course of action available to us—reject the principle as false. And recent commentators on the dispute—some who endorse DC, others who reject it—have attempted to dig out and defend intermediary positions, suggesting that extreme versions of each view are unsatisfactory.⁴

I’m out to defend DC from the actualist attack.⁵ In what follows, I briefly present the central actualist argument against DC. I then show that possibilism has all of the resources to explain the phenomena with which actualists are so concerned. Next, I try to diagnose the actualists’ malcontent: The relevance of certain subjunctive conditionals to consequentialist reasoning has been vastly overemphasized. And finally, I attempt to shed some light on the nature of consequentialist conditionals by incorporating possibilist insights into a semantics for subjunctive conditionals appropriate for consequentialist theorizing.

1. An Actualist Argument against DC

The actualists' problem with DC stems from concerns of agency, in particular, with whether or not certain future acts that an agent will actually perform bear in any way upon her present moral obligations. Actualists believe that, to some extent, they do. An example will suffice to illustrate how.

Consider the case of Fran and Stan.⁶ Fran and Stan are pals. Fran has helped Stan out of binds in the past: lending him money, volunteering her services, etc. But this time, Fran is in a bind. She has come down with an extraordinarily painful medical condition. There is a drug that can relieve her symptoms, but unfortunately it isn't covered by her health insurance plan. Furthermore, she doesn't, at present, have the financial means to acquire the drug. So she approaches Stan, begging her only financially stable friend for a loan. She promises to repay it, and she has a perfect record with respect to keeping promises. Now a question emerges: Upon Fran's asking Stan for the loan, what ought Stan to do? Should he indicate to her that he will grant her the request? Should he then, in fact, lend Fran the cash? Should he indicate to her that he will grant the loan request and lend Fran the cash?

Consequentialists agree that Stan should bring about the Best.⁷ And let's assume that Stan's indicating to Fran that he will grant the loan request and then lending Fran the cash would be best. So actualists and possibilists alike agree about the following obligation claim:

O(Y & L),⁸ where

Y: Stan indicates to Fran that he will grant her loan request.

L: Stan lends Fran the money required to acquire medication.

But there are some complications. While Stan is exceedingly generous with his time and effort, he is not so with respect to his cash. Stan is as stingy as they come, a miser among misers. Furthermore, he knows himself well enough to know that even if he were to indicate to Fran that he would lend her the money, he in fact wouldn't. So the following subjunctive conditional is true, and Stan knows it to be true.^{9,10}

SC: $Y \square \rightarrow \sim L$ (If Stan were to indicate to Fran that he will grant her loan request, then it would not be the case that Stan lends Fran the money required to acquire medication.)

The moral relevance of subjunctive conditionals like SC is, as I see it, at the core of the dispute between actualists and possibilists over principle DC.¹¹ Actualists appear sympathetic to the idea that consequentialism requires us to do that which would bring about the best. That's why they believe that Stan is obligated to do both Y and L. But the truth of conditionals like SC has led actualists to reject DC. The fact that it would be better if Stan were to provide a negative response to Fran's loan request and not lend Fran the money than it would be for him to indicate that he would grant the request and then fail to lend Fran the money has influenced actualists to reject the claim that Stan is obligated to provide an affirmative response to Fran's loan request. In virtue of the truth of SC, the best wouldn't be brought about were Stan to provide an affirmative response to Fran's loan request. Thus, actualists believe that while O(Y & L) is true, O(Y) is false—entailing their rejection of DC.

Furthermore, since Stan knows (or at least: believes to an extremely high degree) that he won't lend Fran the money regardless of what he tells her, actualists believe that he shouldn't indicate to her that he will.¹² A brief investigation of the deontic inferences that actualists accept makes this reasoning explicit.

Actualists (as well as possibilists) believe the following statement of conditional obligation to be true:

$$O(\sim Y/\sim L),$$

where $O(\sim Y/\sim L)$ is read It is obligatory that $\sim Y$ given $\sim L$. And some actualists (contra possibilists) also seem to believe that factual detachment for conditional obligation is valid—that from $O(\sim Y/\sim L)$ and $\sim L$ we can infer $O(\sim Y)$.

Actualists reason that since Stan won't in fact give Fran the money, and since Stan is obligated not to tell Fran that he will lend her the money—given that he won't, Stan is obligated to refrain from telling Fran that he will lend her the cash. It's the moral importance attributed to the future fact about the actual world that Stan won't lend Fran the money conjoined with the fact that he wouldn't lend her the cash even if he were to say, or otherwise indicate, that he would—that separates the actualists from the possibilists.

It's important to note that it is in virtue of the actual fact that Stan simply will not do what's best—that he won't do right by lending Fran the cash whatever he ends up saying, or otherwise indicating, to her—that actualists believe that Stan is not obligated to indicate to Fran that he will grant her loan request. On an actualist account, future wrongdoings have normative implications upon the present. Possibilists, of course, reject any such implications. Possibilists believe we should always do the best we can. And since Stan still can (i) indicate to Fran that he will grant her request and (ii) lend her the cash, possibilists believe he ought to do each.¹³

2. Can Possibilists Explain the Actualists' Worries Away?

The central difficulty that actualists foist upon themselves is a problem of incompatible obligations.¹⁴ If $O(Y \& L)$ is true, then it seems that Stan ought to see to it

that Y is true. But if Stan were to do Y, then he wouldn't do L. And since doing $\sim Y$ and $\sim L$ is better than doing Y and $\sim L$, actualists contend that it's not the case that Stan ought to do Y. So which is it? Ought Stan to do Y or not? Actualists seem to be in a bit of a bind here.

Distinctions have been introduced to disarm the problem: primary vs. secondary obligations,¹⁵ unrestricted vs. restricted obligations,¹⁶ etc. Perhaps Stan has a primary obligation to do Y & L, but since he won't do L—regardless of what he says he'll do—a secondary obligation to do $\sim Y$ is generated. But problems remain. Are primary obligations more important than secondary obligations?¹⁷ 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 ought Stan to do? Actualists don't appear to have an acceptable response to this question. But possibilists do! And, moreover, possibilists have the resources to explain why some are pulled the actualist way.

Take a paradigm possibilist view: Fred Feldman's for example.¹⁸ Feldman elucidates his version of consequentialism by way of a possible worlds framework. Roughly, Feldman's view is that a person, S, is obligated to do something, P, at a time, t, just in case S does P in all of the best accessible worlds to S at t. A best accessible world is one than which no other accessible world is better. The accessibility relation is left undefined as a conceptual primitive; its role is to articulate what an agent can do at a time, that is, which possible worlds an agent can keep open as live options for actuality.¹⁹

It's clear what Feldman's view implies concerning the Stan and Fran case. Since Stan indicates to Fran that he will grant her loan request (Y) and Stan lends Fran the

money required to acquire medication (L) in all of the best accessible worlds to Stan at the time, Stan is morally required to do both Y and L. Whether or not Stan would do L were he to do Y has no normative implications on Feldman's view. (Notice that, surprisingly, Feldman doesn't make use of subjunctive conditionals in the formulation of his theory.) Possibilists believe that we should always do the best we can. Since the best can only be brought about by Stan's doing both Y and L, possibilists contend that Stan is obligated to do Y, and he is also obligated to do L.

But what about the actualists' worries? What can possibilists say about the actualists' intuition that Stan shouldn't indicate to Fran that he will grant her loan request in light of the actual fact that Stan isn't going to lend her the cash regardless of what he says, or otherwise indicates? Why does there seem to be something right about Stan's refusal to tell Fran that he'll lend her the cash, given that he won't lend it to her? I think that this 'rightness' that is detected in Stan's refusal is in fact conditional rightness.

Recall the statement of conditional obligation upon which both actualists and possibilists agree:

$$O(\sim Y/\sim L)$$

Both camps agree that Stan is obligated to refrain from indicating to Fran that he will grant her loan request given that he isn't going to lend her the money: Stan is conditionally obligated to do $\sim Y$. And I suspect that it is in virtue of this fact that actualists have come to view $\sim Y$ as obligatory for Stan. But what is the nature of this conditional obligation? And what implications, if any, does the truth of $O(\sim Y/\sim L)$ have upon the normative status of $\sim Y$?

The nature of Stan's conditional obligation can be elucidated in this way.²⁰

Following Feldman, we can say that a person, S, is obligated to do P given Q at a time, t,

just in case \underline{S} does \underline{P} in all of the best accessible \underline{Q} -worlds to \underline{S} at \underline{t} .²¹ To apply this principle to our case, we must first consider all the worlds accessible to Stan where Stan doesn't lend Fran the cash. Call these worlds ' \sim L-worlds'. Now, from this restricted set of worlds, we can ask ourselves: Which worlds are better? The ones in which Stan does Y? Or the ones in which Stan does \sim Y? The answer, of course, is clear. Among the \sim L-worlds accessible to Stan, all the \sim Y-worlds are better than all of the Y-worlds. Thus, the statement of conditional obligation under consideration here is true on a standard possibilist reading.

Possibilists can also think of Stan's conditional obligation in this way. If it were the case that only \sim L-worlds were accessible to Stan, then Stan would be obligated to do \sim Y.²² But it doesn't follow from the truth of such a conditional that Stan is obligated to do \sim Y. L-worlds are accessible to Stan. And among all of the worlds accessible to Stan, the ones in which Y is true are best. Stan appears to be obligated to make Y true.

Actualists might respond, and some have in fact responded, that factual detachment for conditional obligation is valid; that from $\underline{O}(\sim Y/\sim L)$ and $\sim L$ we can infer $\underline{O}(\sim Y)$.²³ But it isn't. Consider what would follow from treating factual detachment for conditional obligation as valid. Imagine you're faced with a set of alternatives, one of which would clearly bring about the best. But suppose that this optimizing alternative requires a considerable amount of self-sacrifice, so much so that you simply decide not to do it. From there, you could reason about which alternative you are morally obligated to perform given that you won't be performing the best available alternative. Then, by factual detachment for conditional obligation, you could infer that the second best alternative is, in fact, morally required. But if you decide not to do the second best alternative, then you could use the same procedure to generate obligations more suited to

your tastes. Clearly, this is an unacceptable form of moral reasoning, for it makes acting morally “ridiculously easy” in Michael Zimmerman’s terminology.²⁴

Note that if the ‘antecedent’ of the true statement of conditional obligation in the ‘Stan and Fran’ case ($\sim L$) were true and Stan were unable to alter its truth value, then an obligation to make $\sim Y$ true would be in effect.²⁵ But, again, Stan does have the ability to alter the truth value of $\sim L$. It’s just that he won’t. My guess is that actualists either have mistaken the conditional obligatoriness of $\sim Y$ for obligatoriness simpliciter,²⁶ have confused unconditional primary obligations with unconditional subsidiary obligations, or have illegitimately inferred $O(\sim Y)$ from $O(\sim Y/\sim L)$ and $\sim L$ via factual detachment for conditional obligation. Either way presents seemingly insurmountable problems.

Consider what you yourself would say when Fran gives you a call, reporting her chagrin in Stan’s refusal. Would you think, well, Stan did the right thing; he was obligated to tell her that he wouldn’t lend her the cash given that he won’t. I doubt it. It’s more likely that you’d think he was a jerk, that he failed to do his best and thereby did wrong by Fran. You might also recognize that he could have done worse.²⁷ He could have told Fran that he would lend her the money and then failed to do so. But the fact that he could have done worse by no means vindicates what he in fact ends up doing.

3. A Diagnosis of the Actualists’ Woes?

In rejecting principle

$$\text{DC: } O(\underline{a} \ \& \ \underline{b}) \quad \rightarrow \quad O(\underline{a}) \ \& \ O(\underline{b}),$$

actualists strap themselves with the problem of incompatible obligations, a problem from which there appears to be no easy way out, save abandoning actualism altogether.

Possibilists have no such worries. They endorse DC, and furthermore, they have the resources to explain away the actualists’ intuitions: The distinction between obligations

simpliciter and conditional obligations provides for a clear understanding of the phenomena about which actualists are so concerned. So why, in virtue of these facts, do actualists continue to stand their ground? I think their reasons might have to do with the role that subjunctive conditionals have traditionally played in consequentialist reasoning.

Subjunctive conditionals are utilized in virtually every formulation of consequentialist normative theories.²⁸ All of these theories attempt to characterize the moral status of an act in terms of what would occur were it performed when compared to what each of its alternatives would bring about were it performed. Thus, when confronted with the truth of the subjunctive conditional we considered earlier:

SC: $Y \square \rightarrow \sim L$ (If Stan were to indicate to Fran that he will grant her loan request, then it would not be the case that Stan lends Fran the money required to acquire medication.),

some might be led to believe that Y isn't morally obligatory. It's not the case that were Stan to do Y, then the best would be brought about ($\sim Y$ -and- $\sim L$ -worlds are better than Y-and- $\sim L$ -worlds). But notice that just because Stan wouldn't lend Fran the cash—were he to indicate to her that he would—doesn't excuse Stan from both providing an affirmative response to Fran's loan request and lending Fran the cash.²⁹ It's not as if Stan has to refrain from lending the money.³⁰ He could grant the loan, but he won't.

Take a closer look at SC. Notice that the consequent is a proposition about a morally wrong future action that Stan will actually perform, an action within Stan's control either to do or fail to do. Should we, as good consequentialists, be worried about conditionals like SC? In determining the obligations simpliciter of an agent, should we reason with subjunctive conditionals whose consequents are about future moral failings within that agent's control? In my modest opinion we shouldn't, and it's certainly true

that we needn't, yet we must recognize how important subjunctive conditionals (or perhaps subjunctive probabilities) are to consequentialist theorizing. What would happen, or what might happen, or the probability that something would happen—were some action performed—is integral to consequentialist analyses of actions, despite the fact that some possibilists have refrained from including subjunctive elements in the construction of their normative theories. Possibilist theories lacking subjunctive components seem to falter in a range of cases that seemingly require the utilization of subjunctive probabilities. The following “gambling” case illustrates why.

So a question remains: How can we preserve both the subjunctive element of consequentialist theorizing and the possibilist insights defended above? Here's a way that I think that it might be done.

Consider David Lewis's popular semantics for subjunctive conditionals. Lewis's view is that a would-counterfactual of the form 'If it were the case that A, then it would be the case that C' is (non-vacuously) true at a world, i, just in case the consequent, C, is true at all of the closest accessible antecedent worlds to i. ('Antecedent worlds' are worlds where the antecedent is true.)

L: $\underline{A} \square \rightarrow \underline{C}$ is non-vacuously true at i iff C is true at all the closest accessible A-worlds to i.³¹

How close an antecedent world is to a world where a counterfactual is being evaluated is cashed out in terms of comparative overall similarity.³² Roughly, when evaluating subjunctive conditionals via Lewis's semantics we are interested in what occurs in the antecedent worlds that, given a context, are most similar (in relevant respects) to the world where the counterfactual is being evaluated.

In order for

SC: $Y \Box \rightarrow \sim L$ (If Stan were to indicate to Fran that he will grant her loan request, then it would not be the case that Stan lends Fran the money required to acquire medication.)

to be true according to Lewis's semantics, all of the closest antecedent worlds (Y-worlds) to Stan and Fran's world must be $\sim L$ -worlds, worlds in which Stan refrains from lending Fran the cash. And according to the assumptions of our case, SC is true; that is, it's true according to the standard English semantics for ordinary subjunctive conditionals.³³ But I've argued that the truth of SC shouldn't bother consequentialists about the plausibility of DC while recognizing that subjunctive elements cannot be ignored. Consider this possibilist modification of Lewis's account.

The similarity relation employed to determine the closeness of worlds does a tremendous amount of work in Lewis's semantics. We can replace the standard similarity relation with one almost identical to it except that it fails to register differences between worlds due to the future moral failures of agents whose actions are under evaluation. When an agent's act is under evaluation, her future moral failures and all of the events causally resulting from such failures simply would not register as differences between worlds according to this new "possibilist"-modified version of the standard similarity relation.

Adjusting Lewis's semantics by replacing the standard similarity relation with this possibilist one results in what I take to be a very attractive semantics for consequentialist subjunctive conditionals. According to the possibilist version of Lewis's semantics, SC is false, though it's true according to the standard version of Lewis's semantics. But that's fine. Consistency requires that we endorse DC. The possibilist modification of Lewis's view preserves both consistency and attractive subjunctive elements relevant to consequentialist theorizing. Consequentialist subjunctive conditionals are different from ordinary, run of the mill subjunctive conditionals.³⁴ The importance of subjunctive conditionals like SC to consequentialist reasoning has, it seems, been greatly exaggerated.

Casino Case

Imagine that you work as an administrator for a legitimate and respectable charitable organization. One of your biggest contributors just happens to be an enormously successful professional gambler who consistently wins millions after millions at the poker and craps tables. After a surprisingly lucrative weekend, he gives you a call, requesting that you fly down to Vegas to eat some lunch and pick up a big bag of cash. (Like many gamblers, he loves the feeling of holding hard, cold cash--and he feels just great when he hands over big bags of cash to representatives of his favorite charities.) So you fly down to Vegas and meet the gambler at one of his favorite casinos for lunch. After eating, he suggests that you watch him work on the craps tables.

[Insert new argument against POSS, then motivate PROB-POSS. Slap all this action in above]]

4. Conclusion

Among consequentialists, actualists alone face the seemingly insurmountable problem of incompatible obligations. Furthermore, the “levels” of obligation that many actualists are willing to posit in attempts to disarm this problem can, to a degree, be accommodated within the possibilist framework without inconsistency.³⁵ Possibilists utilize a notion of conditional obligation that, in many respects, is very much like the notions of “restricted” or secondary (or for that matter, n -ary, where $n > 1$) obligation that actualists tend to adopt. And finally, the particular subjunctive conditionals that might play some role in motivating actualist maneuvering appear to be expendable in consequentialist reasoning; contemporary possibilists have carved a path for us to attend to our consequentialist reasoning without them. So why reject DC? The reasons appear to be lacking, and the theoretical support for DC impressive.

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¹ The possibilist camp includes Goldman (1978), Greenspan (1978), Thomason (1981), Humberstone (1983), Feldman (1986), Zimmerman (1996), and Vorobej (2000). Note that Thomason (1981), Humberstone (1983), Zimmerman (1996), and Vorobej (2000) aren’t necessarily consequentialists, but consequentialist interpretations of their positions are available. Furthermore, Prawitz (1970) and Bergström (1976) appear to accept DC as well.

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.

³ The actualist camp includes Goldman (1976), Sobel (1976) and (1982), Jackson and Pargetter (1986), Goble (1993), and perhaps Vallentyne (2000).

⁴ Carlson (1995) and (1999) reject DC but are hesitant to be included among the actualists, for the rejection rests upon the precise nature of the bearers of normative status and performability requirements. Vorobej (2000) calls himself a “prosaic possibilist,” but his acceptance of a restricted actualist interpretation of forms of factual detachment as valid might suggest that he holds an intermediary position rather than full fledged possibilism.

⁵ One might suggest that the dispute between possibilists and actualists is a substantially normative one, not merely a logical one. But I don’t think that the two are so easily separated. Different types of normative theories require different logical undergirdings.

This was established in Alan McMichael’s observation that the explication of

‘conditional obligation’ in David Lewis’s Counterfactuals is inapplicable to consequentialist theorizing, something to which Lewis whole-heartedly agreed. See McMichael (1978) and Lewis (1978).

⁶ This example is a variant of the ‘Jack and Jill’ case presented by Carlson (1999), which, in turn, is structurally similar to the ‘Procrastinate’ and ‘Journal Referee’ cases presented by Jackson and Pargetter (1986) and Thomason (1981), respectively.

⁷ More carefully: Most consequentialists do. 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) and Mulgan (1993).

⁸ This obligation statement might be considered to be incomplete in some respects. It should also, perhaps, explicitly indicate whose obligation it is and when the obligation is in effect. I will leave these features to be gleaned from the context.

⁹ Some might believe that letting Stan know that he won’t lend Fran the cash regardless of what he agrees to do somehow undermines the case. I’m guessing that such folks find the following moral principle plausible.

K~O: If S knows that S will not perform act, A, then S cannot be obligated to do A.

But K~O is an unacceptable moral principle. Michael McKenna brought the following example to my attention to illustrate why.

Frank is a racist. He hates all G-colored people. He knows that if he goes to the market, he will be obligated to perform an action of type X for a G-colored person. Knowing himself well, he knows that, for any G-type person, he will not X. Of course, he knows that he *can* X for a G-colored person. But he would never stoop so low.

Is Frank not obligated to X because he knows that, for racist reasons, he simply won't? I think not. The same goes for Stan. He knows that he can lend Fran the money; it's just that he won't.

¹⁰ Some might still take offense to the claims that SC is true and that Stan knows that SC is true, seemingly central assumptions of our case. These assumptions, however, can be softened without dampening the strength of the argument. One can imagine the case to be modified in this way: Let the subjunctive probability of $\sim L$ given Y be extremely high and let Stan believe SC to be true to an extremely high degree.

¹¹ Cf. Zimmerman (1996): 189.

¹² Curiously, Carlson (1999), a writer who rejects DC, believes that the act consisting of Stan providing an affirmative response to Fran's loan request lacks normative status while the act consisting of Stan failing to do so comes out morally wrong. For details, see §1 of his (1999).

¹³ An objector might have some problem with the Stan and Fran Case; such is frequently the case in discussions of moral philosophy. So here is a different but structurally similar case that has been used to make the same point in Jackson and Pargetter (1986): 235.

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’.

¹⁴ Cf. §6.2.1 of Zimmerman’s (1996) where Zimmerman presents a list of principles that actualists are committed to rejecting.

¹⁵ McKinsey (1979) suggests that there are different “levels” of obligation that will disarm the problem of so-called incompatible obligations.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ McKinsey (1979) seems to believe that obligations of different levels are 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 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)

¹⁸ Other possibilist constructions would work equally well. For example, consequentialist versions of the theories presented by Humberstone (1983) and Zimmerman (1996) would generate the desired results.

¹⁹ See Chapter 2 of Feldman’s (1986) for a precise characterization of the normative theory sketched above.

²⁰ The analyzing of conditional obligation has an interesting history. Initial attempts were made by Rescher (1958) & (1962) and von Wright (1964) & (1965). Substantial criticisms and improvements were introduced by Hansson (1969). Lewis (1973)

provided further substantial improvements; see §5. 1 of his (1973)—perhaps the most popular analysis of conditional obligation via a possible worlds framework.

Notice also that some possibilists, notably Humberstone (1983), advocate that we analyze conditional obligation in the way Lewis (1973) suggests. See §4. 4 of Feldman's (1986) for a fully general consequentialist account of conditional obligation. See Chapter 4 of Zimmerman's (1996) for a deontically neutral account of conditional obligation.

²¹ See §4. 4 of Feldman (1986). The account presented in Chapter 4 of Zimmerman's (1996) would work just as well.

²² I suspect that the truth of this sort of counterfactual conditional has led theorists such as Jackson and Pargetter (1986) to endorse the view that Stan is obligated to do $\sim Y$: Among the restricted set of accessible worlds (the $\sim L$ -worlds), $\sim Y$ -worlds are best. But I might be wrong about this. Regardless, Jackson emphatically stated that he continues to reject DC at the 2005 Conference of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies at Dartmouth College.

²³ Jackson and Pargetter (1986): 238-239. Jackson and Pargetter distance themselves from this claim in their (1987), but, by doing so, they seem to be distancing themselves from actualism as well. See §6.3.3 of Zimmerman's (1996) for a clear presentation and criticism of the views put forth in Jackson and Pargetter's (1986) and (1987).

²⁴ Cf. his (1996): 117.

²⁵ Arguments of this sort for 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, and Chapter 4 of Zimmerman's (1996).

²⁶ Feldman also believes that this might be at the root of the disagreement between actualists and possibilists; see his (1986): 53-55.

²⁷ Perhaps it is this feature—that Stan could have done much worse—that leads some actualists to endorse his act as morally permissible.

²⁸ The only exceptions of which I'm aware can be found in Feldman's (1986) and Zimmerman's (1996).

²⁹ This point is made in Humberstone's (1983): 23.

³⁰ Virtually the same point is made in Feldman's (1986): 53.

³¹ Lewis (1973) and (1979). Notice that L doesn't quite capture Lewis's preferred view. L invokes the Limit Assumption—an assumption that Lewis rejects since it amounts to ignoring the possibility of infinite chains of more and more similar worlds. Invoking the Limit Assumption for simplicity's sake is harmless in this context, for it won't be playing any role in the upcoming arguments. For Lewis's argument against the Limit Assumption, see his (1973): 19-21.

³² Lewis (1979).

³³ As before, I recognize that some just won't accept the conditional as true in standard English. The case can be modified slightly by making a probabilistic subjunctive conditional true, which I hope will satisfy certain critics.

³⁴ I argue in my (2003) that the semantics for consequentialist subjunctive conditionals, though not ordinary subjunctive conditionals, must be weakly-centered as well—entailing that the truth of both the antecedent and the consequent isn't sufficient to ensure the truth of the conditional itself.

³⁵ Zimmerman does just this in §4.4.2 of his (1996). On this possibilist account, however, failing to attend one's primary obligations by attending to one's secondary obligations is never justified.