Rebuttal to Coleman

Coleman suggests three central things in her commentary: (i) SUB is just as well-suited to deal with our case as PROB SUB is; thus, there aren’t any interesting reasons to prefer PROB SUB to SUB; (ii) I may have failed to describe Feldman’s possibilist view accurately; and (iii) an “intentionally accessible” version of possibilism will solve all our problems without appealing to objective subjunctive probabilities. Let me attend to each point.

“Since we know that there is only a 1 in 6 chance that the die would have come up 1, we also know that there is only a 1 in 6 chance that the outcome of tossing the die would have been better than the outcome of refusing to toss it. Given this piece of information, the original SUB theory says that there is only a 1 in 6 chance that tossing the die was the right thing to do. By the same token, it says that there is a 5 in 6 chance that not tossing the die was the right thing to do. (Vessel’s new version of subjunctivism says, roughly that since there is a 5 in 6 chance that the outcome of not tossing would be better than the outcome of tossing, not tossing was the right thing to do. So Vessel might claim that his new theory is better than SUB on the grounds that his theory gives a more definitive response to the demon die case, but I really don’t see much to choose between them.)” (Coleman)

Coleman writes: “[T]he original SUB theory says that there is only a 1 in 6 chance that tossing the die was the right thing to do. By the same token, it says that there is a 5 in 6 chance that not tossing the die was the right thing to do.”

Some of Coleman’s remarks seem to suggest that SUB is identical to a view something like this:

**SUB2:** An alternative, $a$, is morally right just in case the performance of $a$ would result in the best chance of bringing about the best possible result.

As I see things, SUB doesn’t entail SUB2, nor does SUB2 entail SUB. Furthermore, there is no precise explication of the phrase ‘results in the best chance of the agent of $a$ bringing about the best possible result’. Absent explication of this phrase, it’s impossible to understand how SUB2 is capable of generating normative implications. But I can imagine some theorist who was originally attracted to SUB engaging in this task of explication. Perhaps that theorist is me.

It’s interesting to note that contemporary SUB-theorists do not argue along lines similar to Coleman’s. Contemporary theorists attracted to SUB-versions of objective consequentialism—notably Peter Vallentyne and David Sosa—have suggested that taking a dangerous risk might be considered to be harmful in itself, and thus intrinsically bad in a way that could affect the values of the outcomes of risk-taking alternatives. In our case, Sam takes a dangerous risk in the outcome of $a1$ whereas he doesn’t in the outcome of $a2$. And perhaps it is this feature that would lead contemporary SUB-theorists to deem $a2$ morally obligatory. But I am inclined to think that this way of dealing with the case gets things backwards. The taking of a dangerous risk doesn’t seem to be bad in itself. If an alternative turns out to be morally wrong in virtue of the fact that it involves taking a dangerous risk, then its being wrong seems to be determined by what might happen should that alternative be performed. This violates the spirit of SUB, which explains the rightness or wrongness of an alternative in terms of what *would* happen should that alternative be
performed. As I’ve been saying all afternoon, theories like SUB just aren’t suited to explain how a1 involves Sam taking a *morally unjustifiable* risk.

The fact that there might be a conceptual dispute concerning how SUB should be interpreted between Coleman, on the one hand, and Vallentyne and Sosa, on the other hand, suggests (to me at least) that SUB has some serious problems, problems that PROB SUB does not have.

So, contra Coleman, I do believe there are good reasons to prefer PROB SUB to SUB. The concept of an objective, subjunctive probability is explicated in PROB SUB and utilized in a way that transparently displays how the normative implications of the theory are generated. The same isn’t true of SUB. Furthermore, I believe that PROB SUB provides a more attractive explanation than those of other contemporary SUB-theorists as to why Sam would have taken a morally unjustifiable risk had he tossed the demon’s die.

Now let’s return to possibilism. A possibilist (like Fred Feldman) might respond to my objection by claiming that ‘1’-worlds weren’t accessible to Sam. And, of course, if they weren’t, then Sam did the right thing according to POSS by refusing the demon’s offer. Feldman, in fact, suggests something along these lines in his *Doing the Best We Can*. So, the accusation here is that I’ve mischaracterized Feldman’s view. But I don’t think that I have; the view that I attribute to Feldman is the view that he articulates, despite alleged evidence to the contrary.

To claim that “1”-worlds weren’t accessible to Sam is ontologically unsupportable. If this claim is true—if possibilists can dodge my objection by claiming that “1”-worlds weren’t accessible to Sam—then Cf2 is true—and I’ve presented arguments to establish that it isn’t. The burden of proof is upon the person who claims that ‘1’-worlds are *inaccessible*—that there’s something in the world that serves as the truthmaker for Cf2. But there is no such truthmaker. Was there something preventing Sam from manipulating his fingers in a way that would result in the die coming up “1”? No. One must have *some reason* for declaring Cf2 to be true in light of such arguments. Neither Fred Feldman nor Mary Coleman have suggested any. There are no good reasons to believe that “1”-worlds weren’t accessible to Sam and that Cf2 is true. It was possible for Sam to maneuver his fingers in ways that would result in a “1” coming up; “1”-worlds were accessible to him (in Feldman’s sense of accessibility). It’s just that sometimes it’s very difficult to access accessible worlds. This “non-accessibility” defense against my objection fails, which leads to Coleman’s modification of Feldman’s brand of possibilism.

Coleman proffers the following version of possibilism as a possible solution to the problem our case generates for possibilist theories. She suggests that we replace the version (or versions) of accessibility under discussion thus far with this accessibility relation:

Roughly, a world is *intentionally accessible* to a person, S, just in case S can intentionally see to it that this world occurs, or is actual.

By replacing ‘accessible’ with ‘intentionally accessible’, we get the following form of possibilism.
**INT POSS:** A person, $S$, is morally obligated to do something, $P$, at a time, $t$, just in case $S$ does $P$ in all of the best *intentionally* accessible worlds to $S$ at $t$.

Coleman correctly points out that since ‘1’-worlds weren’t intentionally accessible to Sam, her version of possibilism (which I’m call INT POSS) doesn’t imply that Sam should have rolled the die. While INT POSS gets things right in our case, it fails to capture what objective consequentialism requires in many other cases.

Imagine a case very similar to ours with this difference: If Sam tosses the die and ends up rolling a ‘1’, then the demon will bring about the Bad. But if Sam tosses it and ends up rolling anything but a ‘1’, then the demon will bring about the Good. And like before, if Sam refuses the demon’s offer to toss the die, then the demon will leave the world alone.

INT POSS implies that Sam still ought not to toss the die, though he should, and my view implies that he should. We can alter the case even further. Suppose that the demon proposed the deal with a fair, 20-sided die. INT POSS still implies that Sam should refrain from tossing the die. But, again, he should toss it.

Thank you.