

The hard cases for actualism: Efficacious vs inefficacious oughts

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Abstract

Joe is a firefighter who is sent to rescue a child from a burning building. He is the only person on the scene, and he has a professional duty to do it. Unfortunately, he was too busy gambling to learn anything useful when he was at the firefighter school. As such, suppose that if he enters the burning building, it is sufficiently unlikely that he can successfully rescue the child. It is more probable he will die alongside the child. Ought Joe to save the child? In this paper, I argue that there are two distinct types of ‘oughts’. In one sense, Joe ought to save the child and this is what I call the ‘inefficacious’ sense of oughts. In another sense, it is not the case that he ought to save the child, and this is the ‘efficacious’ sense of oughts. I show how this distinction helps actualism – the philosophical position that what matters for the assessment of options is what will actually happen – deal with a cluster of ‘hard cases’.

Introduction

Weak-willed Susan: Susan is meant to finish a group project today. It is part of her job, and she is capable of the work. But as it happens, she will not in fact do it; she will stay at home and watch TV. Nevertheless, there are two other things she can do. She can call her groupmates from home and let them know that she will not come to the office, in which case her groupmates will rush to do the work for her. Alternatively, she can simply do nothing. The best thing that can happen is if Susan does the project herself, followed by if she lets her groupmates know. The worst that can happen is if she chooses to do nothing. What ought Susan to do?

Philosophers known as ‘actualists’ argue that Susan ought to do the project herself, and, given that she will not, she ought to inform her groupmates. They contend that *what will in fact happen* is relevant to the assessment of options.¹ ‘Possibilists’ disagree, insisting that what matters for the assessment of options is *what is possible to happen*. It is possible for Susan to do the project herself

¹ Actualists: Sobel (1976), Goldman (1976), Jackson and Pargetter (1986), Jackson (2014).

and that is what she ought to do.² I suspect that most people's intuitions accord with actualism in this case. Of course, possibilists have presented multiple objections to the actualist answer. They argue that actualists commit us to an incompatible set of options (both for Susan to do the work herself and to ask her groupmates to do the work), which creates an 'action dilemma'.³ They also argue that actualism lets the agent off the hook too easily, as actualism seems to allow for the fact that an agent will not do something to generate a less demanding option.⁴ Relatedly, they charge that actualism does not take our agency seriously enough, and it is therefore agency-effacing.⁵ These are all important objections, but I want to focus on a different concern in this paper: the concern that actualism leads to counterintuitive or even 'grotesque' conclusions in certain cases.⁶ Consider the following example:

Absent-minded Michael: Michael is looking after his granddaughter Emily, who asks him for a glass of water. As a matter of fact, Michael is about to accidentally give her a glass containing an arsenic solution. When he does so, she will drink the contents of the glass and die. Michael has many options besides giving Emily the arsenic. He could instead give her a glass of water as she requested. Or he could give her a glass of bleach. If he were to give her a glass of water, she would drink it and be happy. If, on the other hand, he was to give her a glass of bleach, then, while she would not drink enough of the liquid for it to be fatal, she would drink enough to suffer severe and irreversible damage to her body. What ought Michael to do?⁷

In this case, the actualist answer – that 'he ought to give her a glass of water, and given that he will not, he ought to give her a glass of bleach' – sounds much less plausible. Instead, most would side with possibilists and hold that Michael simply ought to give her a glass of water. We then have a further puzzle: how can these two otherwise identical cases yield different intuitions?

Let us call cases like Susan the *easy cases* for actualism and cases like Michael the *hard cases*. In the second section, I argue that the hard cases like Michael pose a problem for actualism. I do this by examining two responses that actualists may give to the hard cases. I then present and defend my own proposal. I argue that the key to differentiate hard cases from easy ones lie with differentiating the two types of 'oughts'.

² Possibilists: Goldman (1978), Feldman (1986), Zimmerman (2007). There are also those who try to strike a middle ground: Carlson (1999), Vorobej (2000), Bykvist (2002), Louise (2009), Ross (2012).

³ Carlson (1999). For responses, see Jackson and Pargetter (1986), Jackson (2014).

⁴ Carlson (1999). For responses, see Jackson and Pargetter (1986), Louise (2009).

⁵ For discussion, see Louise (2009).

⁶ Wedgwood (2009).

⁷ Ross (2012), p. 75.

Before proceeding, three preliminary remarks are needed. First, I will use the label ‘*problem cases*’ to refer to both the easy and the hard cases. Problem cases, as I stipulate, have the following structure: an agent S has three options ϕ_1 , ϕ_2 and ϕ_3 . ϕ_1 is the best option all-things-considered, followed by ϕ_2 , which is better than ϕ_3 . We assume that S will not ϕ_1 , and we then ask what she ought to do. When I use ‘ ϕ_1 , ϕ_2 , and ϕ_3 ’ below, I refer to ‘the best option, the second-best option, and the worse option’, respectively. Second, by ‘S will not ϕ ’, I mean ‘S ϕ -ing is sufficiently unlikely’. Similarly, ‘S will ϕ ’ means ‘S ϕ -ing is sufficiently likely’.⁸ In addition, I will use ‘oughts’ and ‘obligations’ interchangeably in this paper. When I talk about ‘what S ought to do’, unless noted otherwise, I mean ‘what S objectively ought to do’. I will further stipulate that what S objectively ought to do is just what she ought to do if she knows all the relevant facts about the case.⁹ Finally, let us clarify what actualists and possibilists agree and disagree upon. They both agree that S ought to ϕ_1 (namely, that Susan ought to do the project herself and Michael ought to give Emily a glass of water). What they disagree about is whether S ought to ϕ_2 . Only actualists hold that S ought to ϕ_2 . More controversially, I will assume that both sides agree that, ‘S ought to ϕ_2 , *if* she will not ϕ_1 ’.¹⁰ What they disagree about is whether ‘S ought to ϕ_2 , full stop’. To put it differently, I assume that actualists and possibilists agree on the conditional obligation that, if Susan will not do the project herself, she ought to inform her groupmates. However, only actualists hold that, *given* Susan will not do the project herself, she ought to inform her groupmates.¹¹

Why do the hard cases pose a challenge for actualism?

Consider two responses that actualists may give to the hard cases. For one, actualists can bite the bullet and accept that Michael ought to give Emily a glass of bleach. To make this more palatable, they can emphasise the distinction between objective obligation and subjective prescription/deliberation. It will surely be bizarre if someone tells Michael that he ought to give his granddaughter a glass of bleach. It will also be inappropriate if Michael deliberates in a way that

⁸ Louise (2009), p. 333.

⁹ See Jackson (2014), pp. 640-43. Also Louise (2009).

¹⁰ This is the point made in Jackson and Pargetter (1986).

¹¹ This assumption is controversial. For example, Kieseewetter (2015, pp. 934–36) would deny that possibilists accept ‘S ought to ϕ_2 , *if* she won’t ϕ_1 ’. Instead, he holds that the possibilist answer is: S ought to {if she won’t ϕ_1 , ϕ_2 }. The difference is that, according to Kieseewetter, the ought claims of possibilists are *wide scope* rather than *narrow scope*. Regardless, this complication wouldn’t matter for my purposes in this paper.

involves considering giving his granddaughter a glass of bleach. Nevertheless, actualists can insist this is indeed what Michael objectively ought to do.

The problem with this response is that it won't convince many people who are puzzled by the hard cases. Many possibilists will still hold onto their conclusion that the actualist answer is counterintuitive, even after they recognise that it's the objective obligation we focus on. Consider an analogy. Some philosophers hold that we have very stringent obligations to help the global poor.¹² They often remind us that it is probably not pragmatically useful to tell people that they have such stringent obligations, as this will make them give up doing anything altogether. Nevertheless, for many of those who disagree, they often still hold onto their conviction, even when they agree that we are talking about the objective obligations and not about what's useful to tell other people.¹³

In addition, many possibilists take the hard cases like Michael as a decisive objection against actualism. Jacob Ross, for example, takes the case of Michael as showing that 'the main problem with actualism is that it's obviously false'.¹⁴ Ralph Wedgwood holds that the hard cases render actualism 'a deeply objectionable view'.¹⁵ Therefore, it seems all the more pressing that actualists can say something more to convince those who don't share their intuition.

Another way actualists can respond is to argue for a threshold on obligations. They can hold that 'S ought to ϕ ' has a built-in requirement on how bad ϕ can be. One suggestion is that perhaps ϕ needs to be *pro tanto* permissible.¹⁶ But this is an unacceptably ad hoc solution. The so-called 'lesser-evil' cases also show that sometimes the agent ought to do what is *pro tanto* impermissible to do.¹⁷

Another suggestion actualists can make is that perhaps ϕ needs to be permissible all-things-considered. That is, perhaps we ought only to do acts that are permissible all-things-considered. Even if this is true, it still begs the question. If actualists insist it is not true that Michael ought to give his granddaughter a glass of bleach because doing so is impermissible all-things-considered, we might want to know why this option is impermissible all-things-considered. More precisely, we

¹² E.g., Singer (1972), Sobel (2007).

¹³ E.g., Kamm (2001, 2007), Hurka and Shubert (2012).

¹⁴ Ross (2012), pp. 75–76.

¹⁵ Wedgwood (2009).

¹⁶ By *pro tanto* permissible acts, I just mean acts that are permissible absent countervailing reasons. For discussion on *pro tanto* obligations, and how they differ from prima facie obligations, see Reisner (2013).

¹⁷ Lesser-evil cases are those where both options for the agent are impermissible. See, e.g., Lazar (2012, 2018).

want to know why doing the second-best option is impermissible all-things-considered in the hard cases, while doing the second-best option is not impermissible in the easy cases. That means we are back to the start – we need an account that distinguishes the easy cases from the hard ones.

Solving the hard cases: Efficacious and inefficacious oughts

We start with an observation that both the hard and the easy cases are cases where the agent will not do the best option (i.e., S won't $\phi 1$), and this seems to have a bearing on their obligations. After all, it is only because Susan will not do the project herself that leads actualists to contend that she then ought to tell her groupmates about it. But here is one difference between the hard and the easy cases: in the hard cases, we assume not only that the agent will not do the best option, but also that *she will do the worst option* (i.e., S will $\phi 3$). That is, in the case of Michael, we assume not just that he will not give Emily a glass of water, but also that he will give her a glass of an arsenic solution. Of course, S will $\phi 3$ entails that S won't $\phi 1$ – but, importantly, it also entails that S won't $\phi 2$. In other words, one feature that distinguishes the hard cases from the easy ones is that we stipulate in the hard cases that *the agent will not do the second-best option*. Given this structural difference, I posit the following hypothesis:

- (1) In the problem cases, S ought to $\phi 2$ iff it's not the case that S won't $\phi 2$.¹⁸

Principle (1) vindicates our intuitive responses to the problem cases. In the easy cases like Susan, given it is not true that she will not inform her groupmates, informing her groupmates is therefore also something she ought to do (i.e., the actualist answer). In the hard cases like Michael, given he will not in fact give Emily a glass of bleach (as he will give her arsenic solution instead), giving her a glass of bleach is therefore *not* something he ought to do (i.e., the possibilist answer).

As I stipulated above, by ' S will not $\phi 2$ ', I mean ' S $\phi 2$ -ing is sufficiently unlikely'. Note that 'it is not the case that S will not $\phi 2$ ' does not mean ' S will $\phi 2$ '. That is, to say doing something is not sufficiently unlikely does not entail that doing it is sufficiently likely. Suppose you are indecisive between whether to have Indian or Chinese for dinner. It might be that it is not sufficiently unlikely that you choose Indian, nor is it sufficiently likely that you do so (you might say, 'it's 50-50'). This distinction is important because although it is not true that Susan will not inform her groupmates,

¹⁸ This is a claim *about* the problem cases, and not a general claim that *figures into* the problem cases. That is, 'it's not the case that S won't $\phi 2$ ' is a sufficient and necessary condition for ' S ought to $\phi 2$ ' *only in the problem cases* – my claim is not that 'it's not the case that S won't $\phi 2$ ' is a sufficient and necessary condition *in general* which happens to apply to the problem cases. See, also note 20. I thank Prof. Southwood and an anonymous reviewer from the ANU Philosophy department for raising this point.

nor is it true that she will. Principle (1) holds that satisfying the former is enough for her to hold the obligation to inform her groupmates, and that this is why we can maintain the actualist answer in the easy cases.

Principle (1) gives us the intuitively right results, but can we motivate it with a coherent rationale, so as to avoid the worry that it is ad hoc? Consider first the more general worry about whether the likelihood of S ϕ -ing can have any bearing on S's obligations. It may be objected that our obligations have nothing to do with how likely it is for us to do certain things. But that cannot be true, because the actualist response in the easy cases depends on the idea that the likelihood for us to do certain things *does* have an impact on our obligations. After all, it is only because Susan will not do the project herself that prompts actualists to hold that she then ought to inform her groupmates.

A more specific worry possibilists might raise is why the fact that S will not ϕ_2 blocks her obligation to ϕ_2 , but that S will not ϕ_1 does not block her obligation to ϕ_1 . Namely, the central issue is why in the hard cases where the agent is sufficiently unlikely to either ϕ_1 or ϕ_2 , she ought to ϕ_1 but not ϕ_2 (the possibilist answer, which we assume to be correct).

Here is my suggestion: the obligations to do ϕ_1 and ϕ_2 are distinct, and only the latter is sensitive to the likelihood of the agent ϕ -ing. To support this, I will argue first that there are two distinct types of 'oughts', and only one of them is sensitive to the likelihood of S ϕ -ing. I will then demonstrate why the obligation that S has to ϕ_2 (in the easy cases) is this latter obligation.

To see whether there are two distinct types of obligations, consider the following:

Untrained firefighter: Joe is a firefighter who is sent to rescue a child from a burning building. He is the only person on the scene, and he has a professional duty to do it. Unfortunately, he was too busy gambling to learn anything useful when he was at the firefighter school. As such, suppose that if he enters the burning building, it's sufficiently unlikely that he can successfully rescue the child. It is more probable that he will die alongside the child.

Ought Joe to save the child? I think we have conflicting intuitions here. In one sense, yes, he ought to save the child. That is because the child needs help, and Joe has the professional duty to rescue. But in another sense, no, it is not the case he ought to save the child – the reason being that it is sufficiently unlikely for him to succeed. If he enters the building, he will sacrifice his life without achieving any good.

Let us call the sense in which he ought to save the child the ‘*inefficacious*’ sense of obligation, and the sense in which he ought not to rescue the child the ‘*efficacious*’ sense.¹⁹ I contend that we can distinguish inefficacious oughts from efficacious oughts as follows:

- (2) S ought to ϕ , in an efficacious sense, only if it is not the case that S will not ϕ .²⁰

Principle (2) states that efficacious oughts are conditional on it not being the case that the agent ϕ -ing is sufficiently unlikely, whereas inefficacious oughts have no such condition. This explains the conflicting intuitions in the case of Joe. Given that it is sufficiently unlikely for him to (successfully) rescue the child, it is not the case that he ought, in an efficacious sense, to rescue them. Nevertheless, he still ought, in an inefficacious sense, to rescue them. But what does that mean? Are there any other differences between efficacious and inefficacious oughts other than whether the ought claims are conditional on the likelihood of S ϕ -ing?

I think the following also holds:

- (3) When S ought to ϕ , in an efficacious sense, S is compelled to take steps towards ϕ -ing. When S ought to ϕ , in an inefficacious sense, it is not necessarily the case that S is compelled to take steps towards ϕ -ing.

By ‘take steps towards ϕ -ing’, I mean ‘doing what is necessary in order to ϕ ’. For example, for Joe to ‘take steps towards saving the child’ is for him to enter the burning building, as entering the burning building is what is necessary to save the child. By ‘S is compelled to X’, I mean ‘X is the appropriate response for S to have’. In this instance, I mean when S ought to ϕ in an efficacious sense, the appropriate response to this obligation is to take steps towards ϕ -ing.

Consider an analogy. Suppose you agreed to go to a music concert with me, and we agreed to buy our tickets separately in advance. Suppose that you did not. On the day when we meet outside the

¹⁹ Following Southwood (2016, p. 17, n. 29), I shall remain neutral on whether our talk and thought of involving ‘ought’ are literally ambiguous or whether ‘ought’ claims can express different propositions without being literally ambiguous.

²⁰ Note that ‘it’s not the case that S won’t ϕ ’ is only the *necessary* (but not sufficient) condition for S to hold an efficacious obligation. This is because there can be cases where it’s not the case that S ought, in an efficacious sense, to do something, even if it’s not sufficiently unlikely for him to succeed. For example, suppose instead that it’s not sufficiently unlikely for Joe to rescue the child, but if he does try to rescue, it’s sufficiently likely that he will suffer from severe burns. We might then argue that perhaps Joe ought not to rescue the child, in an efficacious sense, because the cost to him is too high (saving the child is now supererogatory). Some might also note that principle (2) only states the necessary condition for S’s holding an efficacious obligation while principle (1) states the necessary and sufficient condition. This is not an issue for my account, as ‘it’s not the case that S won’t ϕ ’ is a necessary and sufficient condition for S to hold an efficacious obligation *in the problem cases*, although ‘it’s not the case that S won’t ϕ ’ is only a necessary condition for S to hold an efficacious obligation *in general*. Some might also wonder whether the converse of principle (2) is true. Namely, some might wonder whether ‘S ought to ϕ , in an inefficacious sense, if it’s the case that S won’t ϕ ’. I don’t think so. There are cases where the agent can’t ϕ and she is not culpable for the fact that she can’t ϕ . In those cases, it’s not true that she ought to ϕ , in an inefficacious sense. See my discussion below.

concert hall, I might say to you, ‘you ought to go to the concert with me!’ What I am referring to in this instance is an inefficacious obligation, because the appropriate response for you to have is not to do what is necessary to go to the concert with me. Entering the concert hall, for example, seems to be what is necessary for you to go to the concert with me. Clearly, the appropriate response for you to have when I complain to you is clearly not to enter the concert hall without a ticket.

Principle (3) explains what is entailed when we say, ‘in one sense, Joe ought to save the child; in another sense, it is not the case that he ought to do so’. What we mean is that Joe ought to save the child, although he should not enter the burning building. This indicates that the obligation Joe has is an inefficacious one.²¹

Before we move on to consider how efficacious and inefficacious oughts apply to the problem cases discussed above, consider two objections to the case of Joe. Some might reject that Joe ought to save the child. They might argue this along the line of ‘ought implies can’ principle.²² That is, Joe ought to save the child only if he can save the child, in a relevant sense. Because he cannot save the child, it is not the case that he ought to. Despite all the disagreement around whether ought does imply can, I think most would agree that if S is culpable for the fact that she cannot ϕ , this does not block her obligation to ϕ . I ought to submit this paper tonight. I cannot do that if I destroy my laptop now. Surely, I still ought to do so even if I do destroy my laptop, and thereby making myself incapable of submitting the paper. Similarly, the fact that Joe cannot save the child does not block his obligation to do so, because he is culpable for the incapability.

Some might then deny that there is any sense in which it is not true that Joe ought to save the child. They might argue that because Joe is the only one culpable here, he unequivocally ought to save the child. But again, when we have an obligation to do something, it often means that we have an obligation to do what is necessary to achieve that thing. I ought to submit this paper tonight, and writing it now is what is necessary for me to submit the paper. I therefore ought to write it now. By contrast, it is implausible to maintain that Joe ought to go into the burning building, despite it being necessary for fulfilling his obligation to save the child. Therefore, it seems that there is indeed a sense in which it is not the case that Joe ought to save the child.

²¹ Kieseewetter (2015) defends what he calls the ‘*transmission principle*’, which holds that ‘if you ought to perform a certain act, and some other action is a necessary means for you to perform that act, then you ought to perform that other action as well’. Principle (3) can therefore be seen as holding that *transmission principle only applies to efficacious oughts but not inefficacious oughts*.

²² For discussion of ‘ought implies can’, see Mason (2004), Vranas (2007), Cohen (2008), Gheaus (2013) and Estlund (2014).

Let us now turn back to the problem cases.²³ In the easy cases, S ought to ϕ_1 , and given that she will not, she ought to ϕ_2 . In the hard cases, S ought to ϕ_1 , but it is not the case that she ought to ϕ_2 . We speculated above that this difference in obligations exists because in the hard cases, S will not ϕ_2 (i.e., S ϕ_2 -ing is sufficiently unlikely). Now we have an explanation as to why the fact that S will not ϕ_2 in the problem cases means that it is not the case that she ought to ϕ_2 (principle (1)): the sense in which she ought to ϕ_2 is the efficacious sense. Because S ought to do something in an efficacious sense only if it is not true that she will not do that thing (principle (2)), and because it is true that she will not do ϕ_2 in the hard cases, S ought not to ϕ_2 in the hard cases.

But a question remains: why should we believe that the sense in which the agent ought to ϕ_2 in the problem cases (as opposed to the sense in which she ought to ϕ_1) is the efficacious sense? The answer: because the appropriate response for S to have in virtue of her obligation to ϕ_2 is to do what is necessary to ϕ_2 . The appropriate response for S to have in virtue of her obligation to ϕ_1 is not, however, to do what is necessary to ϕ_1 (principle (3)). Consider:

Professor Procrastinate: Procrastinate receives an invitation to review a book. He is the best person to do the review and has the time. The best thing that can happen is that he says yes, and then writes the review. However, were he to say yes, he would not in fact get around to writing the review – this is the worst that can happen. The second-best thing is if he says no and Dr Reliable writes the review instead.²⁴

In this classic (easy) case, most agree that Professor Procrastinate ought to accept the invitation and do the review (ϕ_1), and given that he will not, he ought to say no (ϕ_2). Why is the sense in which he ought to accept the invitation and do the review the inefficacious sense? Because this obligation does not entail that Procrastinate ought to do what is necessary to fulfil it – namely, to accept the invitation. Otherwise, it would indeed create an ‘action dilemma’ (i.e., he ought to accept and reject the invitation). Similarly, the sense in which he ought to say no is the efficacious sense, as it does follow from this that Professor Procrastinate ought to do what is necessary to fulfil the obligation (perhaps, by emailing the editor to turn down the invitation).

To sum up my proposal: in the problem cases, the sense in which the agent ought to do the best option is the inefficacious sense, and the sense in which she ought to do the second-best is the efficacious sense. For the agent to hold efficacious obligations, it must not be the case that her fulfilling the obligation is sufficiently unlikely. The hard cases differ from the easy ones in that the

²³ To avoid confusion: the case of Joe is not an easy or a hard case. I introduce it in order to demonstrate and make plausible the distinction between efficacious and inefficacious oughts.

²⁴ Jackson and Pargetter (1986).

agent is sufficiently unlikely to do the second-best. Therefore, it is not true that the agent ought to do the second-best in the hard cases, despite the fact that she ought to do so in the easy cases.²⁵

Now, consider an implication of my proposal:

Irresponsible Lucy: Lucy owes Katie \$500. She has made the promise to pay back the money today. As it happens, she does not actually have \$500 now, as she has spent all her money on the World Cup. Alternatively, she can pay Katie \$300, which is not as good as repaying in full, but is certainly better than nothing. Unfortunately, Lucy does not have \$300 either. What ought Lucy to do?

I suspect most would agree that what she ought to do is to pay back \$500. It would not make much sense to say, ‘she ought to pay \$500, and given that she will not, she ought to pay \$300’. Such talk only makes sense in the context where her repaying \$300 is not sufficiently unlikely. Therefore, it seems that we can apply the distinction between efficacious and inefficacious oughts to account for this case – she ought, in an inefficacious sense, to pay \$500. It is *not* the case that she ought, in an efficacious sense, to pay \$300 (given that she will not pay \$300), because doing so is sufficiently unlikely.

But this case differs from the hard cases like Michael in one respect. In cases like Michael’s, the agent will not do what is best (i.e., S will not ϕ 1) but she nonetheless *can* do what is best, in the relevant sense. In the case of Lucy, however, she not only will not do what is best (i.e., repaying \$500), she also *cannot* do it (i.e., she does not have the money now). Regardless, as our discussion of firefighter Joe suggests, the fact that the agent cannot do something when she is culpable for that incapacity does not block her inefficacious obligation to do that thing. As Lucy cannot repay the

²⁵ In a sense, my argument can be understood as supporting a particular formulation of actualism. That is, there are two ways to formulate actualism: a) for any options ϕ 1, ϕ 2, ϕ 3, such that ϕ 1 is morally preferable to ϕ 2 and ϕ 2 is morally preferable to ϕ 3, if S will not ϕ 1, S ought to ϕ 2; b) out of any set of options { ϕ 1 ... ϕ n}, S ought to do the best remaining option after excluding all options that she will not in fact do. My argument is therefore an argument about why b) is the more plausible version of actualism. I thank an anonymous reviewer from the ANU Philosophy department for this point. I agree that my argument does support b) as a more plausible formulation, but I will note that it is not always clear which formulation actualists adopt, and this may explain why the debate about the hard cases can be confusing. For example, Jackson and Pargetter (1986, p. 233) state that ‘[b]y Actualism we will mean the view that the values that should figure in determining which option is the best and so ought to be done out of a set of options are the values of what would be the case were the agent to adopt or carry out the option, where what would be the case includes of course what the agent would simultaneously or subsequently in fact do: the (relevant) value of an option is the value of what would in fact be the case were the agent to perform it’. This is not an explicit endorsement of either a) or b), as it only tells us *how we should determine the value of an option*, ϕ – we determine it by looking at what will actually happen – and not *when an option ought to be chosen*. As such, before presenting a hard case cited above as an objection, Ross (2012, p. 76) formulates actualism as the view that ‘an agent ought to ϕ just in case she ought to prefer the outcome that would result from her ϕ -ing to the outcome of that would result from her not ϕ -ing’. This is a view about not only how we should determine the value of an option but also when an option ought to be chosen (i.e., it ought to be chosen just in case its alternative, ϕ' , is better—which is close to though not identical with formulation a)). As such, my argument serves to clarify the dispute.

money only because she has spent all her money, she ought, in an inefficacious sense, to repay \$500.

The implication of this is that we can now broaden the types of cases relevant to the actualism–possibilism debate. Traditionally, cases that are relevant to the actualism–possibilism debate are only those where S will not ϕ_1 but can still ϕ_1 . Our discussion suggests that cases like Lucy’s, where S will not and cannot ϕ_1 , and she is culpable for the incapacity, are also relevant to the actualism–possibilism debate.²⁶

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed what I call the ‘hard cases’ for actualism. These are cases where S ought to ϕ_1 , but it is not the case that S ought to ϕ_2 . They differ from the easy cases for actualism, where the actualist answer is the intuitive one. I have first argued that the hard cases indeed pose a problem for actualism, as the actualists’ attempts to bite the bullet or impose a threshold are not satisfactory ways to address these cases. I then put forward my account, which holds that the sense in which S ought to ϕ_2 in the problem cases is the efficacious sense. Because S ought to ϕ , in an efficacious sense, only if it is not true that S will not ϕ , and because it is true that S will not ϕ_2 in the hard cases, it is not the case that S ought to ϕ_2 in the hard cases. In other words, Susan ought, in an efficacious sense, to inform her groupmates because it is not sufficiently unlikely that she does so. By contrast, it is not the case that Michael ought, in an efficacious sense, to give his granddaughter a glass of bleach as it is indeed sufficiently unlikely for him to do so.

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²⁶ Some may object that my proposal is not an actualist proposal after all. This is because it may be argued that actualists must insist one only ought to do the second best (i.e., ϕ_2) if one is robustly disposed to fail to do the best option (i.e., ϕ_1), and it seems that my examples like Susan are not really cases where the agent is robustly disposed to fail to do the best option. As such, it doesn’t seem to vindicate actualism. In reply: I don’t think actualism only applies to cases where the agent is robustly disposed to fail to ϕ_1 (at least, not if ‘robustly disposed to fail to ϕ_1 ’ means anything more than ‘will not/sufficiently unlikely to ϕ_1 ’). Suppose Professor Procrastinate would have been able to stop procrastinating if he took a magic pill yesterday. Suppose that he did not, in which case I still don’t think he should say yes to the invitation (i.e., an actualist answer). This is so even if it was really quite likely that he took the pill yesterday, so his tendency to procrastinate is not modally robust. I think modal robustness only matters to the extent that it means Professor ought to ϕ_1 in an inefficacious sense. That is, if the tendency to procrastinate is modally robust in that there was nothing that Procrastinate could have done to stop procrastinating, perhaps it is not the case that Procrastinate ought to accept the invitation and do the review (or at least he is excused from failing to accept and review – this may be so because the obligation to accept and review is generated from sources other than his ability, such as his professional duty or his promise). I thank Prof. Southwood for this objection.

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