

Abstract for “Defending a Possibilist Insight in Consequentialist Thought”

John Stuart Mill was perhaps the greatest spokesperson for the paradigm form of consequentialism: utilitarianism. He was also immensely interested in puzzles in philosophical logic. It’s certain that were he on the philosophical scene today, he would be engaged in the following logico-normative dispute between factions of contemporary consequentialists.

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

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

The principle states that for any acts a and b, if it is obligatory for a specific agent to do the 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—those who believe that we should always pursue a “best” possible course of action available to us—accept the principle as true. Actualists—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.

I’m out to defend DC from the actualist attack. In this essay, 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. 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.

Jean-Paul **Vessel**