Example of a Decent Solution of a Philosophical Exercise

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Version of 25 March 2011
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1. The Exercise

An optimizing morality can be characterized as a morality that endorses the following principle:

**(OPT)** Every agent ought always to do the best she can.

Now, it seems that situations are conceivable in which there is no best thing to do. For example, a situation in which an agent can choose from infinitely many actions, one better than the other. (If you are a utilitarian, you might think of a situation in which there is no limit to the amount of happiness the agent can cause: 100 units, 1,000 units, 10,000 units of happiness, and so forth.) Discuss the problem that the »no best action« possibility raises for an optimizing morality, and possible ways out of that problem.
2. An Example of a Decent Solution, without Comments

Let me call a situation in which no best action is available an NBA situation, with »NBA« mnemonic for »no best action«. The question is in what respect NBA situations are a problem for the claim (OPT) and what can be done about it.

Of course, NBA situations would pose no problem whatsoever for optimizing moralities if such situations could not exist – if there always had to be a best thing to do. But that is, as the example in the exercise suggests, a rather implausible thing to say, and so having to say it would be a serious problem for optimizing moralities. Let us suppose, then, that such situations can exist.

The problem that results for optimizing moralities depends on the interpretation of (OPT), so let me distinguish two such interpretations. The first possibility is that we read (OPT) as meaning:

(OPT′) Every agent ought always to do the best she can do, even if there is no best thing she can do.

Clearly, (OPT′) would give us a morality that involves obligations that cannot be met – a morality that violates the principle that »ought« implies »can«. That principle, however, is basic and plausible, and so optimizing moralities would have a serious problem.

Fortunately, another interpretation of (OPT) is available:

(OPT″) Every agent ought always to do the best she can do provided there is a best thing she can do.

This is not a far-fetched interpretation of (OPT). We understand many other »ought« statements in much the same way as implicitly conditional. For example, the utterance »You always ought to put your garbage in the garbage bin« is normally understood to mean that you ought to put your garbage there provided you have garbage. The utterance is not normally understood as claiming that you do anything wrong on those occasions on which you do not have any garbage and therefore don’t put it in the garbage bin. In much the same way, (OPT″) makes explicit a conditional reading of (OPT). (OPT″) does not claim that you do anything wrong on those occasions on which there is no best thing to do and therefore you don’t do a best thing. An agent can thus meet the obligation (OPT″) even in an NBA situation, and so we have avoided violating the principle that »ought« implies »can«.

As so often when one problem is out of the way, another problem pops up instead: in an NBA situation, what else ought the agent to do? Now that interpretation (OPT″) has rescued her from the unfulfillable obligation to optimize, we – or the friends of optimizing moralities – still need to say which obligation she has. However, there is a fair chance that the best answer to that question, whatever it and its shortcomings may be, is less problematic than violating, as our first interpretation (OPT′) did, the principle that »ought« implies »can«. So for friends of optimizing moralities, (OPT″) seems the best bet.
3. The Same Example, with Comments

Let me call a situation in which no best action is available an NBA situation, with »NBA« mnemonic for »no best action«. The question is in what respect NBA situations are a problem for the claim (OPT) and what can be done about it.

Of course, NBA situations would pose no problem whatsoever for optimizing moralities if such situations could not exist – if there always had to be a best thing to do. But that is, as the example in the exercise suggests, a rather implausible thing to say, and so having to say it would be a serious problem for optimizing moralities. Let us suppose, then, that such situations can exist.

The problem that results for optimizing moralities depends on the interpretation of (OPT), so let me distinguish two such interpretations. The first possibility is that we read (OPT) as meaning:

(\text{OPT}') Every agent ought always to do the best she can do, even if there is no best thing she can do.

Clearly, (\text{OPT}') would give us a morality that involves obligations that cannot be met – a morality that violates the principle that »ought« implies »can«. That principle, however, is basic and plausible, and so optimizing moralities would have a serious problem.

Fortunately, another interpretation of (OPT) is available:

(\text{OPT}''') Every agent ought always to do the best she can do provided there is a best thing she can do.

(\text{OPT}''') is not a far-fetched interpretation of (OPT). We understand many other »ought« statements in much the same way as implicitly conditional. For example, the utterance »You always ought to put your garbage in the garbage bin« is normally understood to mean that you ought to put your garbage there provided you have garbage. The utterance is not normally understood as claiming that you do anything wrong on those occasions on which you do not have any garbage and therefore don’t put it in the garbage bin. In much the same way, (\text{OPT}''') makes explicit a conditional reading of (OPT). (\text{OPT}''') does not claim that you do anything wrong on those occasions on which there is no best thing to do and therefore you don’t do a best thing. An agent can thus meet the obligation (\text{OPT}''') even in an NBA situation, and so we have avoided violating the principle that »ought« implies »can«.

As so often when one problem is out of the way, another problem pops up instead: in an NBA situation, what else ought the agent to do? Now that interpretation (\text{OPT}''') has rescued her from the unfulfillable obligation to optimize, we – or the friends of optimizing moralities – still need to say which obligation she has. However, there is a fair chance that the best answer to that question, whatever it and its shortcomings may be, is less problematic than violating, as our first interpretation (\text{OPT}') did, the principle that »ought« implies »can«. So for friends of optimizing moralities, (\text{OPT}'''') seems the best bet.