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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 85, No. 4. (Oct., 1976), pp. 449-487.

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DATED RIGHTNESS AND MORAL IMPERFECTION

HOLLY S. GOLDMAN

One must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain: not the higher act which one bungles. . . . Self-knowledge will lead us to avoid occasions of temptation rather than rely on naked strength to overcome them. We must not arrogate to ourselves actions which belong to those whose spiritual vision is higher or other than ours.

—Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*¹

THIS paper has two purposes. First, I argue that Iris Murdoch's character is correct in urging us to heed our moral limitations and choose when necessary to perform the lower rather than the higher act. Second, I investigate the moral principles required to accommodate the fact that a moral statement's truth value may vary over time. The second project may initially seem unconnected with the first, but reflection indicates that one cannot adopt such principles without deciding whether or not the view expressed by Murdoch's character is correct, and I shall argue that it is. I begin with the question of dated rightness, which will occupy the first five sections of the paper.

I

G. E. Moore apparently thought that if an action is right, then it always was right and always will be right.² But maintaining that the truth of moral statements does not vary over time presents us with the following difficulty. Suppose I have promised to provide my students on Wednesday with a list of paper topics. Being a confirmed procrastinator, I fail to prepare the list, and arrive in class on Wednesday without one. If "ought" implies "can", then it is false on Wednesday that I ought to give the students a list, since I am then unable to do so. According to Moore, it would always be false that I ought to give them a list. But surely I can't be let off the hook so

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* (New York, 1958), pp. 193, 195.

² G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (New York, 1912), p. 33.

easily; I must be doing *something* wrong in failing to keep my promise. This problem can be solved by recognizing that the truth value of a moral statement may vary over time. Since I was still able on Tuesday night to give the class a list on Wednesday, we can say that I had an obligation as of *then* to do so. Thus we can locate my dereliction, and retain the thesis that “ought” implies “can”, by saying that it is true on Tuesday but not on Wednesday that I ought to give the students a list, and I do wrong in violating this earlier obligation.³

A moral statement whose truth value may alter with time can be expressed somewhat artificially, but more conveniently, by a tenseless statement which includes temporal indicators specifying the time of the obligation as well as the time of the act in question.⁴ Thus we can say that I ought on Tuesday night (that is, as of Tuesday night) to give the students the list on Wednesday, but it is not the case that I ought on Wednesday (that is, as of Wednesday) to give the students the list on Wednesday. For such tenseless statements, indeed, Moore was right, for they are always true if they are ever true. In general, it appears that any moral judgment concerning the obligatoriness of an action may be fully expressed by a statement of the form “S ought at t_1 to perform act A at t_{1+n} ”, where time t_{1+n} is understood as the same as, or later than, time t_1 . Parallel locutions are appropriate to express judgments concerning the rightness or wrongness of actions. For the purposes of this paper, I adopt such statement forms as canonical.

The use of moral statements with explicit temporal indicators allows us to recognize two problems in moral theory which have gone relatively unnoticed. First, since it can be true that one ought now to perform an act in the nonimmediate future, we need normative principles to tell us under what circumstances one has such obligations. Standard normative theories, such as utilitarianism or Ross’s deontological theory, are vague on the relation between the

³ This problem could also be avoided by positing a species of obligation which does not imply ability (e.g., we could say that I am obliged on Wednesday to provide my students with a list, even though I am then unable to do so). However, the best available account of such obligations also requires tensing moral statements. See Richmond H. Thomason, “Deontic Logic as Founded on Tense Logic” (unpublished manuscript).

⁴ For a discussion of this usage, see W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 172-173. “Tense then, is to give way to such temporal qualifiers as ‘now’, ‘then’, ‘before t ’, ‘at t ’, ‘after t ’, and to these only as needed. . . . ‘Tabby eats mice’ . . . [becomes] ‘Tabby at t eats mice’ . . .”

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time of the obligation and the time of the act. However, it appears best to interpret them as only attempting to tell us when an agent ought now to perform an act now. Thus we need to supplement the standard theories with principles of "dated rightness" designed specifically to assess the current moral status of future actions.

The second problem is closely linked to the first. Reflection suggests that the current moral status of *future* acts may affect the current moral status of *present* acts. For example, in the case recently described, it appears I have an obligation on Tuesday to *prepare* a list of topics for my students. But what precisely explains this obligation? The act of preparing a list of paper topics has no recognized intrinsic moral value. Evidently my obligation to prepare the list is explained by the *derivative* value the act possesses, a value which perhaps is traceable to the fact that preparing the list enables me to fulfill my obligation to give the students the list on Wednesday. We can define the *derivative moral value* of an act as the value it derives from its relations to possible or actual subsequent acts the agent might perform, in virtue of *their* moral value. Most standard normative theories do not take this sort of value into account when assessing the rightness or wrongness of an act. Since this factor clearly plays an important role in determining an act's moral status, we must augment standard theories with principles that appraise the derivative moral value of actions.

In this paper I propose principles of "dated rightness" and "derivative value" intended to solve the two problems just described. I first consider and reject several plausible sets of principles and then introduce the principles I believe to be correct. These latter principles will embody the position that one must sometimes choose the lower rather than the higher act. Because the two problems are so closely interconnected, several of the principles incorporate both principles of dated rightness and principles of derivative value. Precisely how these principles relate to the standard normative theories becomes clear in what follows. I assume without argument, however, that principles of dated rightness and derivative value should be compatible with any standard normative theory. Thus, for example, the principles I propose accommodate both deontological and consequentialist theories. This neutrality should not mislead one into viewing the proposed principles as metaethical; they are substantive normative principles. But they are normative principles on a level different from the ones with which we are most accustomed to dealing.

II

Before considering possible principles of dated rightness and derivative value, it is necessary to clarify some preliminary matters. First, in what follows I assume determinism with respect to human acts and decisions. More strongly, I assume that it is always completely determinate what would happen if an agent acted otherwise than he does.⁵ These assumptions are of course controversial, but I believe it is one of the tasks of moral philosophy to explore what impact, if any, the truth of determinism would have on the moral criticism of action.

Second, in this paper I am concerned with the *objective* moral status of actions, rather than with their *subjective* status. Roughly speaking, the objective moral status of an act is the moral status it enjoys in virtue of its *actual* circumstances and consequences, while the subjective moral status of an act is the status it enjoys in virtue of the agent's *beliefs* concerning its circumstances and consequences.⁶ Thus a doctor who attempts to cure a case of pneumonia by administering penicillin to a patient with an undetected allergy to it does what is subjectively right but objectively wrong. Although ordinary moral thought does not make this distinction clearly, it tends more commonly to focus upon the subjective moral status of actions. This fact may make it difficult to marshal appropriate intuitions for some of the cases described below.

Third, I am concerned with the moral status of *actions*, not with the moral status of the *agents* of those actions. Thus I shall be asking,

⁵ This latter assumption has been denied, for example by David Lewis in *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 93. If it is false, the principles of dated rightness will have to be somewhat more complex than the ones I consider.

I make this assumption partly for purposes of simplification. Even if the connection between an action and the events which might follow it is probabilistic rather than deterministic, one still needs principles of dated rightness and derivative value. It is fairly easy to construct appropriate probabilistic versions of the principles I shall examine, although I shall not attempt to do so in this paper.

⁶ There is reason to doubt whether we actually make judgments concerning the objective moral status of actions, since we are (and know ourselves to be) rarely in a position to know all the morally relevant circumstances and consequences of an act. Nevertheless I believe we employ the concept of such judgments as an ideal on the basis of which to construct the judgments of subjective status to which we are normally restricted. Thus it appears that the task of considering a class of principles of objective rightness is prior to the task of considering the associated set of principles of subjective rightness.

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“Is this the best act to perform in the circumstances?” not “Would the agent be praiseworthy or blameworthy for performing such an action?” or “Would a person of good character perform this act?”. Again, because these distinctions are not finely drawn in ordinary moral thinking, one may find it difficult to assess some of the cases described below. I shall say more about this later.

Fourth, for stylistic reasons I frequently speak of an act being *obligatory* or of an agent having an *obligation* to perform an act, rather than saying that the agent *ought* to perform the act. This is misleading, since the logic of obligations is different from the logic of what ought to be done. In all cases I mean to be examining the *latter* notion. One important way in which the two notions differ will be indicated in a later section.

III

Since I wish to maintain that a person may have a present obligation to perform an act in the nonimmediate future, and also to retain the maxim that “ought” implies “can”, it is incumbent upon me to explain the notion of a person’s having the *present ability* to perform an act in his nonimmediate future. Fortunately, an analysis of this notion is ready at hand. Let us take for granted some analysis (consistent with the hypothesis that human acts are determined) of an agent’s having the ability at t to perform an act at t . Then we may say that an agent has the ability at t_1 to perform an act A at t_{1+n} just in case there is a sequence of acts such that the agent has the ability at t_1 to perform the first of these acts at t_1 , and if he performs the first act, then at a later time he will have the ability to perform the second act at that time, and if he performs the first two acts at their respective times, then at a still later time he will have the ability to perform the third act at that time, and so forth, until finally if he performs all the acts in the sequence at their respective times, then at t_{1+n} he will have the ability to perform act A at t_{1+n} .⁷ For example, I have the ability

⁷ This definition is derived from that presented by Alvin I. Goldman in *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970), pp. 204-205. It incorporates a revision he suggested privately to obviate a difficulty in his original definition.

For simplicity, I speak of an agent’s ability at t_1 to perform an action at t_1 , although it might be more accurate to locate the time of the agent’s last ability to perform the act slightly prior to the time of performance. I also speak of “acts” where frequently the correct term would be “possible acts.” Context should be sufficient to disambiguate this usage.

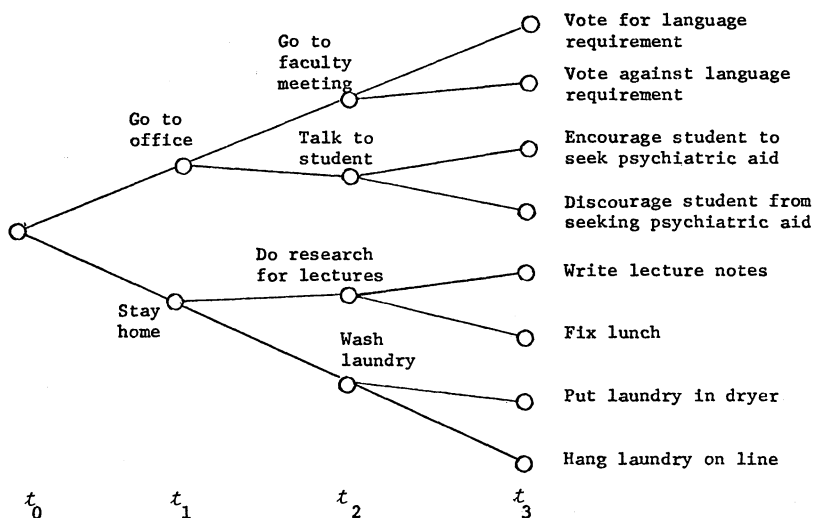
now to buy a Coke at the nearest vending machine five minutes from now. That is, if I get up from my desk, I will then have the ability to walk to the machine, and if I do that, I will then have the ability to place a quarter in the slot, and if I do that, I will then have the ability to remove the Coke. Notice, however, that I may lose this ability over time. If I sit typing at my desk a minute longer instead of performing the first act in this sequence, someone else will purchase the last can of Coke before I get there, and I will have lost my chance.

IV

Having explained what it is for a person to have the ability at t_1 to perform an act at t_{1+n} , let us now consider what principles of dated rightness determine the moral status at t_1 of an act which would be performed at t_{1+n} . At any time until the end of his life, a person has various possible courses or sequences of actions open to him. For example, suppose a faculty member, Jones, is currently trying to decide whether to go to the office or to stay at home. If she goes to the office, she can either attend a faculty meeting or talk with one of her students. If she stays at home, she can either do research for her lectures tomorrow or wash the laundry. If she attends the faculty meeting, she can either vote for or against a motion to establish a language requirement for undergraduates. (Let us assume that if Jones doesn't attend the meeting or votes against the motion, it will fail, whereas if she votes for it, it will pass; and also assume that the college ought to impose such a language requirement.) If she talks with her student, he will ask her advice about seeking psychiatric counseling, and Jones can either encourage or discourage him. (Let us assume that if she doesn't talk with him, or if she encourages him, he will seek and obtain effective help, whereas if she discourages him, he will not seek help and will eventually suffer a serious emotional breakdown.) If she does research for her lectures tomorrow, she can then either write out her lecture notes or fix lunch for herself. If she washes the laundry, she can then either put it through the dryer or hang it out on the clothesline. The initial stages of the courses of action open to Jones are represented in the following diagram.

Let us now consider what Jones ought at t_1 to do at t_2 and t_3 . Perhaps the most natural way to answer this question is by extending the application of the standard normative theories forward in time,

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using them to determine (from the point of view of t_1) the moral status of acts performable at future times as well as the status of acts performable at t_1 itself. A standard normative theory assesses the current moral status of a present act by comparing it to its alternatives with respect to whatever criteria the theory deems relevant. Thus an extension of such a theory would simply involve assessing the current moral status of a future act by comparing it to its alternatives with respect to the same criteria. Here a complication arises because the notion of a future act's "alternatives" is ambiguous. Since an agent may possess at one time, but later lose, the ability to perform each of two acts, the acts will be alternatives to each other at the former but not at the later time. Thus we must speak of actions being alternatives to each other *relative to a given time*, understanding that acts are alternatives to each other relative to time t_1 only if it is true for each act that (a) the agent has the ability at t_1 to perform it, and (b) the time at which the first act would be performed is the same as the time at which the second act would be performed. Thus Jones' voting for the language requirement and her discouraging the student from seeking psychiatric aid are alternatives to each other relative to t_1 , but they will not be alternatives to each other relative to any time after t_2 , for she will have performed some action which cuts off the possibility of performing at least one of these two acts.

Given the ambiguity in the notion of future alternatives, there are at least two distinct ways to extend the standard normative theories.

The first, perhaps initially the most plausible, involves assessing the current moral status of a future act by comparing it to the actions which *would be its alternatives at the time it would be performed*.⁸ Thus Jones' act of voting for the language requirement at t_3 would be compared to the sole act which would be its alternative relative to t_3 , namely her voting against the requirement. The following represents such an extension principle for obligation. I assume here and throughout that time t_1 is the same as, or later than, time t_1 , and also that each act A_1 is associated with a unique time t_1 at which it would occur if it were performed.⁹

E. S ought at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if:

- (1) S has the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 , and
- (2) there is no act which would be an alternative to A_1 relative to t_1 which is at least as good as A_1 .

Since this principle represents an extension of the standard normative theories, some such theory is understood as providing the criteria which determine whether or not an act is "at least as good as" its alternatives. Thus Ross's theory, in conjunction with Principle E, implies that Jones ought to vote for the language requirement if doing so fulfills a more stringent duty than any she might fulfill by voting against the requirement,¹⁰ whereas utilitarianism implies that Jones ought to vote for the requirement if doing so would produce greater utility than voting against it would.

Unfortunately, although this principle is initially plausible, we can see by applying it to the Jones case that it delivers inconsistent prescriptions in some situations. Taking it in conjunction with utilitarianism, let us assume that Jones' voting for the language

⁸ We may say that acts A and B would be alternatives to each other relative to t only if it is the case that (a) if the agent had the ability at t to perform one of these acts, he would also have the ability at t to perform the other, and (b) the time at which act A would be performed is the same as the time at which act B would be performed.

I later assume that sequences of actions can "merge." This assumption renders the above definition, and consequently Principle E, inadequate. Since their correct reformulations are complex and irrelevant to the main issues raised in the text, I do not attempt to state them here. See footnote 17.

⁹ For the sake of simplicity I shall not try to deal with the frequently encountered hypothesis that some acts (e.g., omissions) are either not datable at all, or else only datable to a span of time longer than a single moment.

The corresponding principles for rightness and wrongness would be constructed on the model of the later F and G* principles.

¹⁰ This is slightly inaccurate, since any given act may fulfill and/or violate several duties, all of which must be weighed against each other—in Ross's belief, by a process of intuition.

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requirement would produce greater utility than her voting against it, and also that her encouraging the student would produce greater utility than her discouraging him. Then according to Principle E, Jones ought at t_1 to vote for the language requirement at t_3 —but *also* ought at t_1 to encourage the student at t_3 ! Since these acts cannot both be performed at t_3 , Principle E involves Jones in a pragmatic conflict between on-the-whole obligations. Nor does this fact arise from any feature of utilitarianism which is not shared by other standard theories, but rather arises out of the structure of E itself. Since no moral principle which delivers such inconsistent prescriptions is acceptable, this first extension principle must be rejected.¹¹

Clearly this inconsistency would not arise if Jones' voting for the language requirement were compared (from the standpoint of t_1) not just to her voting against it but also to the other six acts performable at t_3 . Thus a second way of extending the standard normative principles to govern dated rightness would involve assessing the moral status of an act by comparing it to *all* the acts which *are its alternatives relative to the present*. Such a principle of obligation may be stated as follows:

E'. S ought at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if:

- (1) S has the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 , and
- (2) there is no act which is an alternative to A_1 relative to t_1 which is at least as good as A_1 .

Unfortunately, this principle also delivers prescriptions in some circumstances which are inconsistent. For example, E' (in conjunction with utilitarianism) might instruct Jones at t_1 to stay home at t_1 *and also* to vote for the language requirement at t_3 —instructions which are pragmatically inconsistent, since Jones cannot perform both these acts. This result will follow if we suppose first that Jones' staying home would produce greater utility than the other act—going to the office—available at t_1 for performance at t_1 . This might be true because if she stayed home she would do research for her lectures and then write up her notes. Thus this act would result in the student's obtaining psychiatric aid (since he will seek this aid if he has no input from her), the language requirement's failing to pass

¹¹ Some philosophers have denied that pragmatic inconsistency in normative principles is objectionable (see, for example, Bas van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (Jan. 11, 1973), 5-19). I do not accept this view, but in any event the reasons which lead people to embrace it do not apply to the cases I cite here and elsewhere. Thus we may safely reject the E principles on grounds of inconsistency.

(since she will not be at the meeting to cast the decisive favorable vote), the lecture notes' being written up, and the laundry's not being done. On the other hand, if she went to the office, she would then elect to talk with the student and discourage him from seeking psychiatric aid. Thus going to the office would result in the student's having an emotional breakdown (since he will follow her advice), the language requirement's failing to pass, the lecture notes' not being written up, and the laundry's not being done. Assuming that the disvalue of the student's breakdown outweighs the value of the lecture notes' being written, the first set of consequences is better than the second. Thus Principle E' implies that Jones ought at t_1 to stay home at t_1 . But we may suppose in addition that Jones' voting for the language requirement would produce greater utility than any of the other seven acts available at t_1 for performance at t_3 . This would be true because her voting for the requirement would result in its passage, the student's seeking help, the lecture notes' not being written up, and the laundry's not being done, whereas each of the other seven acts would result in a set of consequences having less utility.¹² Thus Principle E' implies that Jones ought at t_1 to vote for the language requirement at t_3 . But in the circumstances, Jones cannot fulfill *both* the obligation to stay home and the obligation to vote for the language requirement. Once again, this inconsistency does not arise from any peculiarity of utilitarianism but rather is attributable to the structure of E' itself.¹³ Thus this second attempt

¹² What consequences her act of voting for the requirement would have depends on one's definition of the notion of "consequence." In the text I have used a notion according to which event E is a consequence of act A if and only if E would follow A and E would not follow some alternative to A relative to the time of the obligation (i.e., t_1). But if one held that E is a consequence of A only if E would not follow some act that *would be* an alternative to A relative to the time of A itself, then the only consequence of her voting for the requirement would be the requirement's passage. On the latter definition, probably her act of encouraging the student would have the best consequences of any of those available at t_3 . However, using any plausible definition of "consequences," one can generate the sort of inconsistency I have found in Principle E'.

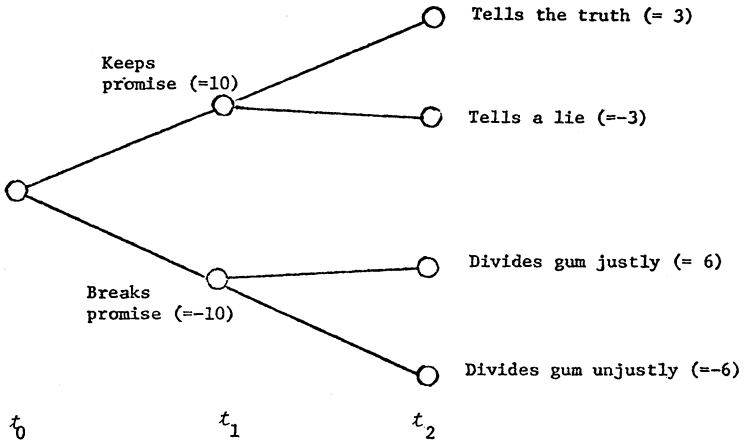
¹³ It is more difficult to employ Principle E' in conjunction with a deontological theory than with utilitarianism. The following case may facilitate demonstrating how inconsistency can arise even on a deontological theory. Imagine that Smith has promised his wife never to buy the kids any bubble gum, but now he has taken the kids to the supermarket and they are clamoring for gum. Smith has the option at t_1 of keeping or breaking his promise. If he keeps it, then he has the option of lying to his kids or telling them truthfully why he won't allow them to have any gum, whereas if he breaks the promise by buying them the gum, he will then have the option of dividing it

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to extend the standard normative theories to cover future actions must be rejected along with the first.¹⁴

As a further objection to the extension principles, it should be noted that since the standard normative theories do not take an action's derivative value into account when assessing its moral status, Principles E and E' also fail to take this feature of an act into account. As we have seen before, such a failure in itself renders any principle of moral rightness unacceptable.

justly or unjustly between them. We can imagine a deontological theory holding that it is right at t_1 for Smith to keep his promise to his wife at t_1 . If such a theory has the resources to compare the four acts available at t_2 , it is possible that it would hold that Smith's act of dividing the gum justly is better than any of the others. This evaluation is represented in the following diagram in which acts are assigned plausible "values" on a deontological theory.



In this case, Principle E' would be inconsistent. If such a theory *lacked* the resources necessary for making this kind of comparison, then Principle E' could not be used in conjunction with it, and therefore would have to be rejected on the grounds that it fails to accommodate all standard normative theories, as I required of principles of dated rightness in Section I.

¹⁴ Louis Loeb has suggested another, initially plausible, version of the extension principles which may be formulated as follows:

E". S ought at t_1 to perform A_1 if and only if

- (1) S will have the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 , and
- (2) there is no act which will *in fact* be an alternative to A_1 for S relative to t_1 which is at least as good as A_1 .

It is easy to show, however, that this principle is subject to the same sort of inconsistency that afflicts E', and thus must be rejected with the others.

Examination of the E and E' principles proposed in the last section demonstrates that any satisfactory principles of dated rightness must be carefully formulated in order to avoid inconsistency. Principle E proved inconsistent because it prescribed more than one action for a given time as obligatory, while Principle E' proved inconsistent because its prescriptions for different times were not properly coordinated. Both these difficulties must be avoided. Given what has been seen so far, the following proposal seems to remedy the problem in an intuitively satisfactory manner. As was noted before, at any time up until the end of his life an agent has a number of courses or sequences of actions open to him. Some of these sequences appear better than others. For example, earlier assumptions about the Jones case make it appear that a sequence of Jones' actions beginning with going to the office, going to the faculty meeting, and voting for the language requirement is better than any other sequence open to her at t_1 . Once this fact is recognized, it seems plausible to say that Jones ought at t_1 to follow this sequence, and to conclude from this that she ought at t_1 to perform each of the actions included in it. Since a sequence of actions is a set of acts all of which can be performed, and only one such sequence is being prescribed, no inconsistency would arise from such a principle.

Developing this proposal requires explaining the notion that one sequence of actions may be better than another. Perhaps this notion can be spelled out in the following manner. We can understand each action as possessing an *overall moral value*, a value which arises from a variety of different sources. For the purposes of this paper, I divide these sources into two categories. The first category contains the sources which are identified by standard normative theories as being relevant to the action's moral status. In the context of some such theories, this category includes standard teleological features of the action, that is, its production of consequences such as happiness or pain which the theory ranks as valuable or disvaluable. It may also include deontological features of the action, for example, features such as its being a case of keeping a promise or telling a lie. These somewhat heterogeneous sources I lump together as contributing to the action's *intrinsic moral value*. Thus, according to some theories, Jones' act of attending the faculty meeting has positive intrinsic value because it gives rise to valuable consequences (pleasure the students will ultimately take in being able to use a foreign language),

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and also because it involves Jones' fulfillment of a duty incumbent upon her as a faculty member.

We can understand most standard normative theories as prescribing a current action just in case that action has the greatest intrinsic value of any alternative available to the agent. Such prescriptions are defective, since they ignore the *derivative moral value* of the action, that is, the value it derives from its relations to possible or actual subsequent acts of the same agent in virtue of *their* moral value. Thus it might be maintained that Jones' going to the office has positive derivative value insofar as it enables her to fulfill her duty by attending the faculty meeting.¹⁵ Clearly the derivative value of an action, as well as its intrinsic value, must be taken into account in determining whether or not it ought to be performed. If we take the overall moral value of an action to be a function of its intrinsic and derivative values, then a prescription for a current action must depend on its overall value, not just on its intrinsic value.

Given these notions, we can now see that the value of a *sequence* of actions must be a function of the values of its member acts (possibly together with the order in which those acts occur). Two types of sequence value are distinguishable: the *overall* moral value of a sequence, that is, the value determined by the overall values of the sequence's member acts, and the *intrinsic* moral value of the sequence, meaning the value determined by the intrinsic values of the sequence's member acts. Since the overall value of a sequence takes into account the derivative values of the member acts, it assesses not

¹⁵ In the somewhat unusual sense in which I am using these terms, both the intrinsic and the derivative values of an action may depend on the consequences it has. In a typical case, however, the derivative value of an action only arises from possible subsequent actions of the same agent, whereas its intrinsic value arises from other sorts of consequences, e.g., episodes of pleasure. Thus the sort of consequence which contributes to intrinsic value usually differs from the sort of consequence which contributes to derivative value. But the precise difference between the two kinds of value lies in the fact that the intrinsic value of an action arises from a different *aspect* of its consequences than the derivative value does. The derivative value of the action arises from the *moral value* of a consequence, whereas the intrinsic value of the action arises from another aspect of a consequence, what Frankena terms its "non-moral value" (William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973), pp. 9-10). Since a single consequence may, according to some theories, have both moral and nonmoral value, it may contribute both to a prior action's intrinsic and to its derivative value. For example, a certain political maneuver might be rated as morally valuable (insofar as it is the right action to perform), and also as nonmorally valuable (insofar as it is an act of skill).

only what the agent would actually accomplish by performing that sequence, but also what he would have placed himself in a position to accomplish by performing that sequence. Since the intrinsic value of a sequence only takes into account the intrinsic values of the sequence's member acts, it only assesses what the agent would actually accomplish by performing the sequence in question. Since we are interested in *complete* sequences of actions, that is, sequences which contain the last act the agent would be able to perform if he followed such a course of action, it appears to me that it is the intrinsic value of a sequence which is relevant to our concerns. Thus henceforth when I speak of the value of a sequence of actions, I shall mean the *intrinsic* value of that sequence. The following material could easily be re-worked, however, to incorporate the alternative method of assessing a sequence of actions in terms of its overall value.

Developing an adequate measure for the value of acts, and employing it to determine the values of sequences of actions, is no trivial project, but let us presume that it can be done.

Assuming that such comparisons between sequences are possible, the present proposal stipulates that the current moral status of a future action is determined by the value of the best sequence of which it is a member. This sort of principle for determining the moral status of future actions has been suggested by Lennart Åqvist and developed by Fred Feldman.¹⁶ Although they propose it solely for use with act utilitarianism, the general idea can be used in conjunction with other normative theories as well. In order to state what I call "F principles" of dated rightness more precisely, one needs the technical concept of a *sequence of actions from t_1 for S* and the concept of two sequences' being *alternative sequences from t_1 for S*. Since these notions are intuitively easy to grasp, their formal definitions are relegated to a footnote.¹⁷ It suffices to say here that by a 'sequence of actions' I mean a sequence which is both *complete* and *maximal*: complete in the sense that after performing the final act in

¹⁶ Lennart Åqvist, "Improved Formulations of Act-Utilitarianism," *Nous* 3 (September, 1969), 299-323, and Fred Feldman, "World Utilitarianism," in *Analysis and Metaphysics*, ed. Keith Lehrer (Dordrecht, Holland, 1975), pp. 255-271. Åqvist does not explicitly state any principles of dated rightness for individual actions, but he appears to use the ones stated by Feldman.

¹⁷ The requisite definitions may be stated as follows:

A sequence of acts ϕ is a *sequence of acts from t for S* if and only if:

1. S has the ability at t to perform all the members of ϕ jointly, each at its respective time,
2. for any act B, if B is not a member of ϕ , then S does not have the ability

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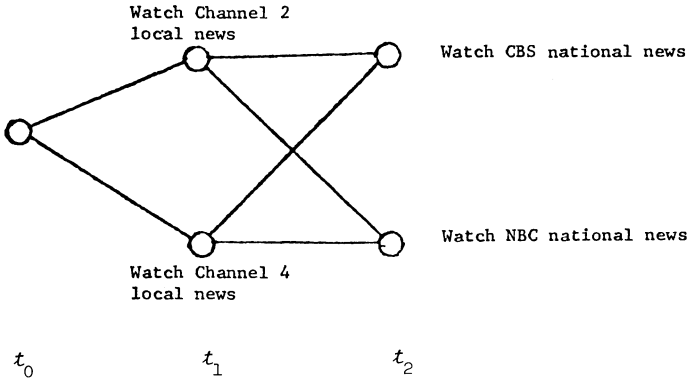
the sequence, the agent would not have the ability to perform any subsequent act, and maximal in the sense that no action is omitted from the sequence which the agent would have the ability to perform between any two of its members. I understand two sequences to be alternatives from t_1 for an agent only if he has the ability at t_1 to perform the first member of each sequence at t_1 , and the remaining members of each sequence at their appropriate times. Two sequences may be alternatives to each other even though their initial segments overlap.

Using these notions, we may state the F principles as follows:¹⁸

-
- at t to perform all the members of ϕ and B , and
3. there is some member A of ϕ such that no member of ϕ would occur later than A .

Two sequences of acts from t for S , ϕ and ψ , are *alternative sequences* from t for S only if S has the ability at t to perform each of the first members of ϕ and ψ at t , and the ability to perform each of the remaining members of the sequences at their appropriate times.

Notice that this definition of a sequence of acts allows sequences to “merge” with each other, as in the following case:



For simplicity, the cases described in the text will not involve merging, and I do not refer to this possibility in expounding the various principles examined.

It is important to point out now that when I speak of two actions' being alternatives to each other, the actions I have in mind are complex acts which include *all* the acts which the agent might perform jointly at the time in question. Thus if an agent could pick your pocket with one hand and slap your back with the other, one of his alternatives (in my sense) would be picking-your-pocket-and-slapping-your-back.

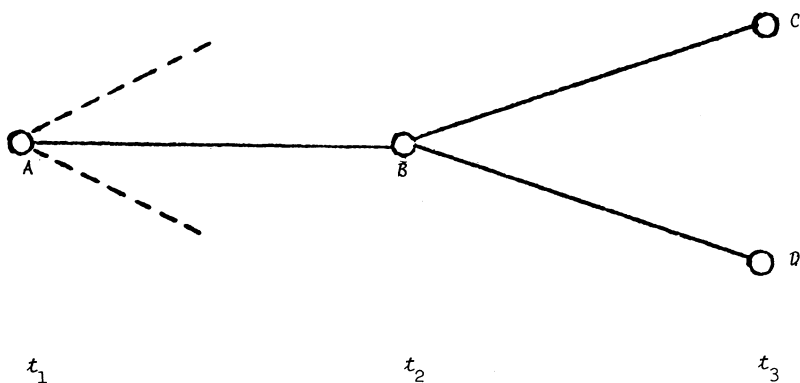
¹⁸ These principles leave no room for morally neutral or supererogatory acts. My assumption is that if we find a set of satisfactory principles for the somewhat artificial notions of “right,” “wrong,” and “obligatory” found in the principles I consider, there

- F 1. *S* ought at t_1 to perform A_1 if and only if A_1 is a member of a sequence from t_1 for *S* such that no alternative sequence from t_1 for *S* is at least as good.
- F 2. *S* is right at t_1 to perform A_1 if and only if A_1 is a member of a sequence from t_1 for *S* which is at least as good as any alternative sequence from t_1 for *S*.
- F 3. *S* is wrong at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if *S* has the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 , and it is not the case that it would be right at t_1 for *S* to perform A_1 at t_1 .¹⁹

As we have already seen, these principles (in conjunction with some plausible standard normative theory) imply in the Jones case that Jones ought at t_1 to go to the office at t_1 , go to the meeting at t_2 , and vote for the language requirement at t_3 , since these acts are initial members of the best sequence of acts available to Jones at t_1 . Every other act she has the ability to perform at those times would be wrong. Such prescriptions, and all those delivered by the F principles, avoid the inconsistency found in the extension principles. They

should be no difficulty in formulating analogous principles containing ordinary concepts of rightness, wrongness, obligatoriness, moral neutrality, and supererogatoriness.

¹⁹ The following sort of case might arise, in which the sequence consisting of acts *A*, *B* and *C* has precisely the same value as the sequence consisting of acts *A*, *B*, and *D* (and more value than any other sequence available to the agent).



In such a case, we would want to say that the agent *ought* at t_1 to perform *B* at t_2 , but the F principles imply that *B* is *merely right*. To circumvent this problem, Principle F 1 should actually read as follows:

- F 1. *S* ought at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if A_1 is a member of a sequence from t_1 for *S* such that no alternative sequence from t_1 for *S* *not containing* A_1 is at least as good.

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have great intuitive appeal, for they require the agent to follow the “ideal” course of action open to him—the course which will maximize the amount of intrinsic moral value achievable in his actions.

Notice that the F principles prescribe current actions as well as future ones. For example, they instruct Jones at t_1 to go to the office at t_1 . In discussing the values of sequences of actions, I claimed that a current act’s moral status (its rightness or wrongness) must depend on its overall moral value, where its overall moral value in turn is determined by its intrinsic and derivative moral values. If the F principles are understood as meeting this stipulation, then we may interpret them as implicitly containing a principle of derivative value. According to these principles, the moral status of a current act is determined by the value of the best sequence of acts of which it is a member (as compared with the values of alternative sequences of acts). If we assume in accordance with my stipulation that such an act’s moral status is also determined by its (comparative) overall moral value, then the overall moral value of the act must be equivalent to the total value of the act’s best sequence. The value of this sequence is determined by two factors, the intrinsic value of the current act itself, and the intrinsic values of the subsequent acts in the sequence. The overall moral value of the act (arising from its intrinsic and derivative moral values) must similarly be determined by these two factors. Since the intrinsic value of the current act simply *is* its intrinsic value, that leaves the total intrinsic values of the subsequent acts in the sequence to determine the act’s derivative value. This fits precisely with the definition of derivative value, according to which the derivative value of an act is that portion of its overall moral value deriving from its relations to the moral values of subsequent acts the agent might perform. Thus we can interpret the F principles as containing an implicit principle of derivative value—a principle which states that the derivative value of a current act is determined by the intrinsic values of the subsequent acts which are members of its best sequence. This implied principle is highly appealing, for it ascribes moral value to a current act in proportion to the value of the best course of action it would enable the agent to pursue. It is surely plausible to maintain that a major reason why Jones ought to go to the office rather than stay home is precisely that doing so will enable her to attend the meeting and vote for the language requirement.

These considerations suggest that the F principles provide a satis-

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factory solution to the problems raised in Section I: as principles of dated rightness and derivative value, they possess a great deal of intuitive appeal while avoiding the inconsistencies found in the earlier E and E' principles.

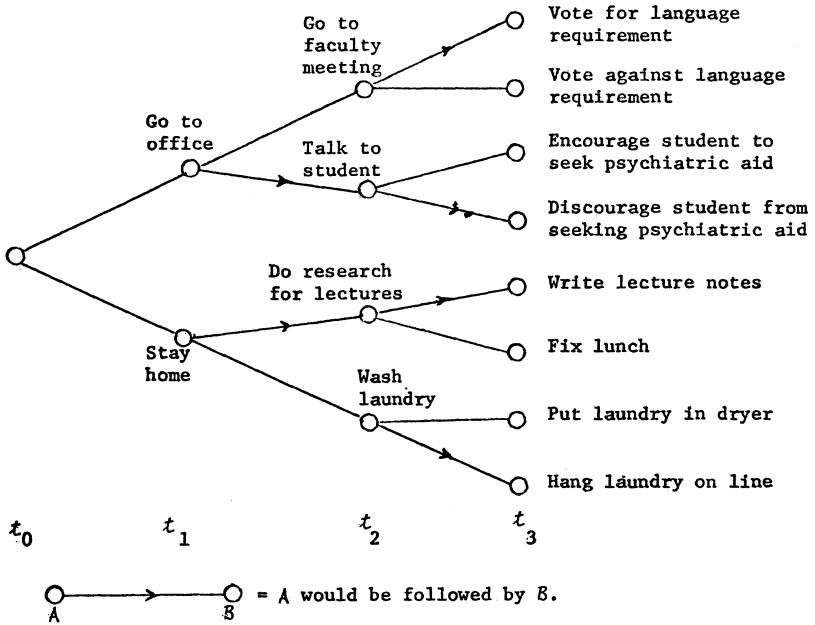
VI

Let us now return to the theme expressed at the beginning of the paper—the claim that one “must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain: not the higher act which one bumbles.” As we have seen, the F principles represent the intuitively attractive idea that a current act is obligatory just in case it would enable the agent to follow the best sequence of acts available to him. But the quotation warns us that merely asking what a current act would *enable* the agent to do may not be sufficient. For what if he bumbles by *failing* to pursue the desirable course that his current act would enable him to follow? To see how this might occur in a concrete situation, let us add the following details to the Jones case. Assume that faulty notification procedures have failed to apprise Jones of the fact that the faculty meeting will discuss a language requirement. Since she therefore believes the meeting will concern only routine matters, if she went to the office, she would in fact choose to talk with the student rather than attend the meeting. Suppose further that such a conversation with the student would suggest (contrary to what is really the case) that he is merely feigning psychological problems to induce her to allow him to drop her course even though the official deadline has passed. Thus if she talked with the student, she would discourage him from seeking psychiatric help. As we have seen, however, he really needs this help, and her discouraging him would lead to an eventual emotional breakdown on his part. Finally, let us assume that if she stayed home instead of going to the office, she would do research on her lectures and then write up her notes. These assumptions together with analogous ones are represented in the following new diagram of the case.

The description of the case that was given previously is consistent with these new assumptions about what Jones would do under various circumstances: the assumptions simply contain information which was irrelevant for the application of the F principles.²⁰ Ac-

²⁰ It is true that most standard normative theories imply that applying the F principles to a particular case involves ascertaining the consequences of individual

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According to these principles, Jones ought at t_1 to go to the office at t_1 , since that action would enable her to pursue the best available course of action. But according to our new information, even though going to the office would *enable* her to follow this course, she would not do so, but instead would pursue an alternative course of action with exceedingly unfortunate results. On the other hand, if she stayed home, she would pursue a course of action which, although inferior to what she *could* do if she went to the office, would be vastly better than what she *would* do if she went to the office. Given this expanded description of the case, my reaction is that the F principles are wrong and the quotation is correct: Jones ought to choose the “lower” act—staying home—rather than the “higher” act—going

actions. Furthermore, the consequences of one action may be brought about by the agent’s performance of a subsequent act in the sequence in question. In applying the F principles, however, we cannot use the fact that (say) if Jones went to the office she would talk with the student, if the sequence we wish to evaluate is a sequence which includes her going to the office and then attending the faculty meeting. Since we must counterfactualize with respect to whole sequences of actions, the information in question, i.e., what an agent would actually do if he performed a given act, is not so much irrelevant in applying the F principles, but rather in most cases is inconsistent with other assumptions that must be made in applying those principles.

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to the office. There seems little point in prescribing an act which puts the agent in a position to do great things if the same act also puts him in a position to do something disastrous, and he would choose the latter rather than the former.

Other cases elicit the same reaction. In the Jones case, the agent would fail to follow the best course of action on going to the office because she would not believe it to be best (since she lacks relevant information about the meeting and the student). Her failure, therefore, could not be attributed to any deficiency in character. But there are other reasons why an agent might fail to pursue the ideal course; in particular, an agent's interests and desires might lead him astray even when he knows what he is doing. For example, suppose I wish to send my sister a birthday present, and must decide whether to send her a record or a book. She would enjoy the record more, and the ideal course of action for me involves buying it, although sending her the book would be better than sending her nothing at all. If I buy the record, however, when I get home I will become so enamored of it that I will decide to keep it for myself, and, having spent all my money, will be unable to send her any present at all. On the other hand, if I buy the book, I will send it to her as planned. Given these lamentable facts, surely I ought to buy the book, rather than buy the record as the F principles would have me do. Or suppose I am considering whether to volunteer to run the departmental placement service. If I became placement officer and worked hard, I would do a superb job, finding respectable positions for all our graduate students. But in point of fact I am very lazy, would shirk my responsibilities, and fail to secure employment for most of the students. If I don't volunteer, a competent and hardworking person will become placement officer instead. In these circumstances, surely I would be wrong to volunteer—and anyone who knew the facts would advise me not to.

Of course, in the last example, I am in a position to know that I ought not to volunteer for placement officer, since I have access to the relevant facts about myself. On the other hand, I may not be in a position to know it would be wrong for me to buy the record, and Jones is certainly not in a position to know that it would be wrong for her to go to the office. Thus I might be *subjectively* right in buying the record and Jones might be *subjectively* right in going to the office, although I wouldn't be *subjectively* right in volunteering. But none of this affects the *objective* status of our actions, that is, the status ascribed to them in virtue of their actual circumstances and consequences.

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Reflection on my reaction to cases like these strongly suggests to me that it is the sequence of acts which *actually would* follow a given action, rather than the best sequence of acts which *might* follow it, that influences its moral status. It may initially seem counterintuitive to take one's future course of action as a fixed upshot of one's present action when assessing the rightness or wrongness of that present action. There are many contexts, however, where we reason in ways that are importantly analogous to the way I am suggesting; reviewing some of them may tend to decrease one's sense that it is inappropriate.

One example of this is the way we reason when the rightness or wrongness of an act we might perform depends upon the acts of other persons. In such a case, we frequently take as fixed the fact that others will perform undesirable acts, and plan our activities accordingly. For example, you may avoid leaving confidential records lying about your office, on the reasonable assumption that many students, given the opportunity, would read those records. But why treat your weaknesses differently from others' weaknesses, when you are not in a position to change them? If you know *you* can't resist reading other persons' papers (for example, letters of recommendation written on your behalf), then you would do best to avoid situations where you will be tempted, rather than "rely on naked strength to overcome them."

One might claim that there is no analogy between one's own future actions and those of another person, so that an appropriate way of viewing the latter will not necessarily be appropriate for viewing the former. There is an important respect in which future actions are *not* different from those of others, however, namely the respect that we cannot exercise direct control over either. Of course, I can *decide* now that in the future I will not look at confidential records concerning myself. But even if I make this decision, it is always possible that I shall change my mind later on. Thus my control over my future action is no more direct than my control over the future actions of others: in both cases what I decide or do now may *cause* those future actions, but in neither case can I bring them about simply by deciding now that they will occur. Thus, in determining whether or not I ought to do act *A* now, it seems relevant to take into account the future acts that *A* would lead *me* to perform, just as it is relevant to take into account the future acts *A* would lead *others* to perform.

A second example of analogous reasoning about future acts arises when we are making purely prudential decisions. Suppose that your

doctor advises you to use a diaphragm rather than the Pill for birth control purposes. You know it is medically preferable, but you also know, impulsive soul that you are, there will be occasions when you won't bother with the diaphragm, and since it is important that you not get pregnant, you opt instead for the Pill. This seems to me perfectly rational, and I can see no reason why prudential reasoning and moral reasoning should differ in this respect. (Imagine your reason for not having children is not just to avoid inconvenience for yourself, but to avoid bearing a child which you know would suffer a severe genetic deformity.)

As a final example, it seems clear to me that we reason this way about future acts when we advise another person what to do. You might advise a politically radical friend not to accept a position at a certain university because you know the social climate there would turn him into a conservative elitist. But surely, if you were deciding whether or not to accept the same position, it would be irresponsible to ignore similar information about your own susceptibility to social pressure. It is precisely this sort of responsibility for one's future self that I am recommending that we ought to take.

These examples show that we take actual, rather than merely possible, future acts into account when we are deciding what to do in the context of others' activities, when we are making purely prudential decisions, and when we are advising others. As I have urged, it seems equally correct to take an agent's own future acts into account when determining what present act he has a moral obligation to perform. Thus I believe the F principles deliver incorrect prescriptions for current actions, since they ascribe moral status to such an action in virtue of the acts it would *enable* the agent to perform, but not in virtue of the acts it would *lead* the agent to perform. The same consideration undercuts the F principles' prescriptions for future actions, since they are also based on the value of the sequence of acts the future act would enable the agent to perform. At the same time their implicit principle of derivative value must be rejected, for if the moral status of a current act is not determined by the value of the best sequence it would enable the agent to perform, the derivative value of the act cannot be a function of that value, either.

VII

In the opening quotation, Murdoch's character states that one must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain,

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rather than the higher act which one bungles. In terms of the problem of dated rightness, we may now interpret this to mean that there are times when one ought to perform an act which would in fact lead one to pursue a better course of action than any alternative, even though one has some alternative which would enable one to follow a better course of action. This is precisely the conclusion to which considerations adduced in the last section have pointed us. Our task now is to capture this idea in a set of principles of dated rightness.

As a first attempt, we might propose assessing the moral status of an act by comparing the sequence which would follow it with the sequences which would follow the acts that *would be alternatives* to it at the time it would be performed. Such a principle of obligation may be stated as follows (here and in the following principles I assume that a "sequence of acts from t_1 which would follow A_1 " includes A_1 itself):

G. S ought at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if:

- (1) S has the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 , and
- (2) the sequence of acts from t_1 which would follow A_1 is better than any sequence from t_1 which would follow any act that would be an alternative to A_1 relative to t_1 .²¹

According to this principle, Jones ought at t_1 to go to the faculty meeting at t_2 , since the sequence which would follow the act (including voting for the language requirement) is better than the sequence (including discouraging the student from seeking psychiatric aid) which would follow talking to the student, the sole act that would be its alternative relative to t_2 . But similar reasoning reveals that Principle G also implies that Jones ought at t_1 to do research on her lectures at t_2 . Since both of these acts cannot be performed, it is clear that Principle G is subject to the same inconsistency that afflicted the earlier Principle E. This fact is hardly surprising, for they both assess the moral status of a future act by comparing it only with the acts which *would be* its alternatives, and yet assess *every* act which might be performed at the same time. It also warns us that we cannot escape inconsistency by adopting a version of Principle G which compares that act with all the acts which *are* its alternatives relative to the present time. Such a principle would suffer the same problem that forced us to reject Principle E': since its prescriptions for different

²¹ For simplicity, in stating all the G and G* principles I speak of one sequence's being "better" than any others, meaning that there is no other sequence which is at least as good as it is.

times are not properly coordinated, it would deliver conflicting prescriptions.

What we must do is find some way of incorporating into consistent principles of dated rightness the intuition that the current moral status of an action is affected by the sequence of acts it would lead the agent to perform. Reflection on the difficulties encountered by the G principles suggests a method for accomplishing this. What we need is a set of principles which only prescribe one action as obligatory for each time, and which connect their prescription for one time in an appropriate manner with their prescriptions for other times. In particular, what they must do is prescribe an action for t_{i+1} from among the limited set of actions that would be available to the agent if he performed the action prescribed for t_i . Such principles would instruct Jones at t_1 to stay home at t_1 , since that act would be followed by a better sequence than its alternative relative to t_1 . Jones' fulfilling this prescription would leave her a choice between doing research for her lectures or washing the laundry. Assuming that doing research would be followed by a better sequence than washing the laundry, the principles would instruct her at t_1 to do research at t_2 . Clearly Jones could fulfill both these prescriptions. Thus a set of principles of dated rightness constructed according to this technique would capture the intuitive idea we want and also meet the requirement of consistency.²²

Formulating principles based on this idea is somewhat complex, although the idea itself is simple. First we need the notion of one action's being an immediate successor to another action. I leave the formal definition of this notion to a footnote, but the intuitive idea is that act B is an immediate successor of act A just in case there is no act the agent could perform between A and B .²³ Using this notion, I can

²² It would have been possible to introduce this technique earlier and apply it to the E principles, which were rejected partly because of an inconsistency similar to that displayed by Principle G. It appears that conjoining the E principles with an appropriate principle of derivative value (which they lack) and using this technique on them would in fact have yielded the F principles. Since the F principles are intuitively plausible in themselves, I abbreviated the discussion by simply introducing them on intuitive grounds rather than arguing that they are the natural outcome of an attempt to render the E principles consistent.

²³ Act A_j is an immediate successor of act A_i if and only if:

- (A) were the agent to perform A_i , he would then have the ability to perform A_j ,
and
- (B) there is no act A_k such that
 - (1) $t_i < t_k < t_j$,

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now state the final principles of dated rightness to be proposed.

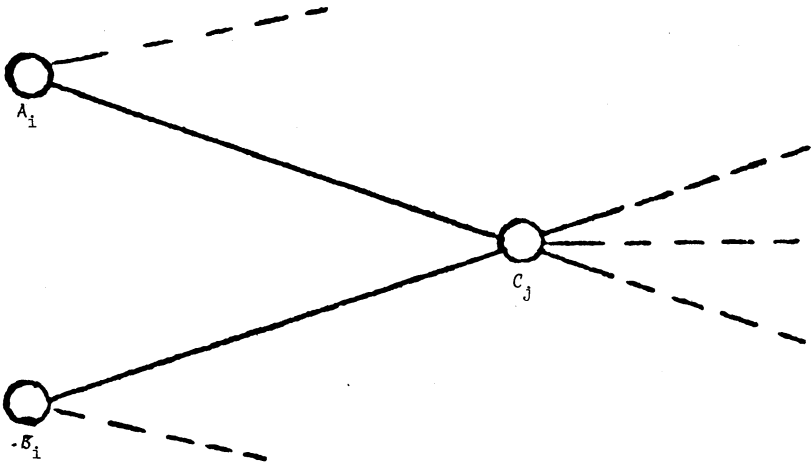
- G* 1. (A) *S* ought at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if:
- (1) *S* has the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 , and
 - (2) the sequence from t_1 which would follow A_1 is better than any sequence from t_1 which would follow any alternative to A_1 .
- (B) If *S* ought at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 , then *S* ought at t_1 to perform an immediate successor B_j to A_1 at t_j if the sequence from t_j which would follow B_j is better than any sequence from t_j which would follow any other immediate successor to A_1 .²⁴

(2) were the agent to perform A_1 , he would then have the ability to perform A_k , and

(3) were the agent to perform A_k , he would then have the ability to perform A_j .

If acts are densely ordered, so that between any two acts there is another, then no act will have an immediate successor in this sense. For simplicity I shall ignore this possibility.

²⁴ Because sequences of acts can merge, the following sort of case can arise, in which we want to view act C_j as obligatory rather than merely right, if the sequence that would follow it is better than the sequence that would follow any other immediate successor to either A_1 or B_1 , and A_1 and B_1 themselves are both right:



To obtain this result, we need an additional clause in Principle G* 1, i.e.:

- (C) If *S* is right at t_1 to perform each of A_1^1, \dots, A_1^n at t_1 , and it is not the case that *S* is right to perform any other act at t_1 , then *S* ought at t_1 to perform an immediate successor B_j to each of A_1^1, \dots, A_1^n at t_j if the sequence from t_j which would follow B_j is better than any sequence from t_j which would follow any other immediate successor to any of A_1^1, \dots, A_1^n .

- G* 2. (A) *S* is right at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if:
- (1) *S* has the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 , and
 - (2) the sequence from t_1 which would follow A_1 is at least as good as any sequence from t_1 which would follow any alternative to A_1 .
- (B) If *S* is right at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 , then *S* is right at t_1 to perform an immediate successor B_j to A_1 if the sequence from t_j which would follow B_j is at least as good as any sequence from t_j which would follow any other immediate successor to A_1 .
- G* 3. *S* is wrong at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 if and only if:
- (1) *S* has the ability at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 , and
 - (2) it is not the case that *S* is right at t_1 to perform A_1 at t_1 .²⁵

Let us apply these principles to the Jones case. Of the two acts available to Jones for performance at t_1 , we assumed that the sequence of acts which would follow her staying at home would be better than the sequence of acts which would follow her going to the office. Thus Principle G* 1 implies that Jones ought at t_1 to stay home at t_1 . Correspondingly, she would be wrong at t_1 to go to the office. Furthermore, *every successor* to this act would be wrong at t_1 , since none of them satisfies a necessary condition for a future act's being right according to the G* principles, namely, being the immediate successor of a right act. Thus every act on the upper half of the tree representing Jones' situation would be wrong at t_1 . The immediate successors of Jones' staying home are her doing research and washing the laundry, each performable at t_2 . If Jones does research, she would then write up her notes; if she washes laundry,

²⁵ I am grateful to G. Lee Bowie for assistance in formulating these principles.

There is reason to suppose that every act consists of a conjunction of "shorter" acts which comprise its temporal parts. If this is true, and if the putative deontic theorem " $O(A \ \& \ B) \supset OA \ \& \ OB$ " is valid, then the G* principles will yield inconsistent prescriptions, for an individual act (e.g., *A*) may be followed by a less good sequence than one of its alternatives—even though a conjunctive act of which it is a member (e.g. *A* & *B*) would be followed by a better sequence than any of *its* alternatives. There are several ways of attempting to meet this difficulty. One is to reject the deontic theorem, which in any case deserves to be viewed with extreme scepticism. I would prefer, however, to deal with the problem by defining different "sizes" of acts and then restricting the application of the G* principles in a natural way to acts of a certain "size" so as to preclude any inconsistency. Because this technique is rather complex, I defer its exposition to a later occasion.

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she would then hang it on the line. We assumed previously that the sequence of acts which would follow her doing research is better than the sequence which would follow her washing the laundry. Thus Jones ought at t_1 to do research at t_2 . Correspondingly, her washing laundry would be wrong at t_1 and so would every successor to that act. Finally let us assume that the sequence of acts which would follow her writing up her notes would be better than the sequence of acts which would follow her fixing lunch. Thus she ought at t_1 to write up her notes at t_3 , and would be wrong at t_1 to fix lunch or perform any of its successors. Thus the G* principles imply that Jones ought at t_1 to stay home, do research, and write up her lecture notes.

Notice that the G* principles prescribe current actions as well as future ones. For example, in the Jones case they instruct the agent to stay home at t_1 . According to these principles, the moral status of a current act is determined by the value of the sequence of acts which would follow it. Since the value of this sequence is determined by the intrinsic values of its member acts, the moral status of the current act is partly determined by its own intrinsic value and partly determined by the intrinsic values of the acts which would follow it. Thus the G* principles, like the F principles, implicitly contain a principle of derivative value which ascribes value to an act because of its relations to subsequent acts the agent might perform. In this case, derivative value is ascribed to an act in proportion to the intrinsic values of the acts which would actually follow it. Such a principle conflicts with the one contained in the F principles, which ascribed derivative value to an act in proportion to the values of the acts which the agent would be enabled to perform. Considerations adduced in the last section showed the latter principle must be rejected; those same considerations directly suggest that the principle of derivative value contained in the G* principles is correct.

One may regard this principle of derivative value as consequentialist, since it assesses the derivative value of an action in accordance with the value of its consequences (where the consequences in question are subsequent acts of the agent, not, for example, subsequent episodes of happiness). Thus I am claiming that the correct theory of overall moral value, the G* principles, includes a consequentialist component. It is important, however, to note that although the principle of *derivative* value I am arguing for is consequentialist, such a principle is compatible with any standard normative theory concerning what makes acts *intrinsically* valuable. It is compatible with a

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principle holding acts to be intrinsically valuable because they fulfill deontic criteria (for example, being a case of promise keeping), as well as compatible with one holding acts to be intrinsically valuable because they fulfill standard utilitarian criteria (for example, producing happiness). Hence the G* principles may incorporate a deontic theory of intrinsic value along with their consequentialist principle of derivative value. Their adoption does not prejudice the case either for or against ordinary utilitarianism as a theory of intrinsic value.

Notice another respect in which the G* principles accord with the stipulations laid down in Section I. The principles imply, as we saw they must, that the moral status of an action may "change over time". For example, in the Jones case the agent is wrong at t_1 to go to the faculty meeting at t_2 . If we assume, however, that she actually goes down to the office rather than staying at home as she ought to, then she will come under an obligation at t_2 to attend the faculty meeting, since that act would be followed by a better sequence than talking with the student would be. Thus Jones' act of going to the meeting is wrong at t_1 but obligatory at t_2 .

VIII

I have now presented what I believe to be the correct principles of dated rightness and derivative value. In this section I indicate how they enable us to retain an appealing but notoriously problematic deontic principle; in the next section I consider possible objections to the G* principles and reexamine the relation between them and the F principles.

Many philosophers have found the following deontic principle enormously attractive:

H. If act B ought to be performed, and act A is necessary for the performance of B , then act A ought to be performed.

It can be argued that the G* principles entail the following restricted and tensed version of this principle:

H'. If S ought at t_1 to perform some act B at t_{1+n} , and S 's performing act A at t_1 (where $t_1 \leq t_1 < t_{1+n}$) is causally necessary for the performance of B , then S ought at t_1 to perform A at t_1 .

Inspecting the diagram representing the Jones case suggests that if an act A is causally necessary for act B , then B must be a successor to

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A. According to the principles, the successor to any action can be obligatory only if that act itself is obligatory. Thus, if a later act *B* is obligatory according to $G^* 1$, then any predecessor to *B*, such as *A*, must also be obligatory—that is, the G^* principles entail Principle H' .²⁶

Although many people would find Principle H' highly intuitive, it has frequently been objected that such principles give rise to the “Good Samaritan Paradox.” The paradox may be illustrated by a case in which Smith robs Brown at t_1 , and then has the option of returning or not returning his money at t_2 . We feel that Smith ought to return Brown’s money, but, since Smith’s robbing Brown is a causally necessary condition for his returning the money, it appears that Principle H' disastrously implies Smith has an obligation to rob Brown. Fortunately, this does not follow from Principle H when the times of the obligations are properly fixed, and the obligation to perform the later act is determined by Principle $G^* 1$. Assume that Smith’s not robbing Brown would result in a better sequence of actions (including, of course, his failing to commit the robbery itself) than his robbing Brown would. Principle $G^* 1$ thus implies that Smith’s robbing Brown, and its successor, his returning the money, would be *wrong* at t_1 . Using this latter fact in applying Principle H' , we see that if Smith has no obligation at t_1 to return the money, Principle H' does not oblige him at t_1 to rob Brown in the first place. (Of course, once Smith has actually robbed Brown, then an obligation arises at t_2 to return the money. But, according to Principle H' , this later obligation does not generate any earlier obligation to rob Brown. The principle only states that Smith has an obligation at t_1 to rob Brown if he has an obligation at t_1 to return the money, and we have seen that he does not. Principle H' links obligations to perform *later acts* with obligations to perform *earlier acts*, but it does not link *later obligations* to *earlier obligations*.) Thus, when Principle $G^* 1$ is employed to ascertain whether or not a later act *B* is obligatory, Good Samaritan cases no longer form counterexamples to Principle H' . The G^* principles therefore have the added virtue of entailing an acceptable version of a deontic principle which many philosophers have been reluctant to abandon even in the face of its apparent difficulties.

²⁶ Because sequences of acts can merge, this must be stated in a more complex manner to insure accuracy.

IX

Let us now consider possible objections to the G* principles. Some people find the principles paradoxical because they require us to view a single act under two modalities. For example, when we use the principles to inquire whether Jones ought at t_1 to stay home at t_1 , we are required to view her doing research for her lectures at t_2 as an inevitable consequence of her staying home. But then when we use the principles to determine whether Jones ought at t_1 to do research at t_2 , we do not view the act as inevitable at all, but rather as one among several alternatives, any one of which she is free to reject. It seems incoherent to view a single act in both these ways—surely it either *is* inevitable, in which case it may be inappropriate to ask whether she ought to perform it, or else it is *not* inevitable, in which case it is inappropriate to view it as a determinate consequence of the earlier act when assessing the moral status of that earlier act.

Although this procedure of viewing a single act under two modalities initially strikes one as strange, I believe it is both acceptable and necessary. Its apparent incoherence may be reduced by reminding ourselves that we reason in precisely the same fashion in many contexts where we are assessing the moral status of two different agents' actions. Suppose for example that Green and White are driving two cars set on a collision course. When we ask what Green ought objectively to do, we take as fixed the fact that White will swerve to the right. But when we ask what White ought to do, we consider him to have several alternatives, any one of which he is free to adopt or reject. Thus we consider White's swerving to the right in two different lights: as inevitable when asking what Green ought to do, but as only one of several merely possible alternatives when asking what White himself ought to do.

If it is permissible to view a single action as both inevitable and merely possible in a two-agent case, there seems no objection to viewing an act in this dual light in a single-agent case as well. Thus no genuine problem appears to be raised by the G* principles' requirement that the modality attributed to an act depends on the question about it one is asking.

The second objection to the G* principles may be stated as follows. Imagine the following case: I have promised my class I will grade their papers and return them by Wednesday. It is now late Tuesday afternoon, and I must decide whether to carry home the stack of ungraded papers or a pile of books. If I take the papers home, I *could*

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grade them this evening and return them on Wednesday—but if I do take them home and start grading them, I will *in fact* become so discouraged at their poor quality that I shall give up and watch television instead. On the other hand, if I take the books home, I will spend a profitable evening doing research for my lectures. The G* principles imply (if we fill out the case appropriately) that I ought to take the books home, since that act would result in the best sequence of actions. They also imply that I would be wrong to take the papers home, and consequently also wrong to return my students' papers on Wednesday. But surely it is true that I now have an *obligation* to return my students' papers tomorrow!

This is correct. It shows decisively that one cannot accurately speak as though one's having an *obligation* to perform an act is equivalent to its being the case that one *ought* to perform that act. I have spoken this way (and will continue to do so) for expository convenience, since there is no noun corresponding to the auxiliary verb 'ought'. It appears, however, that obligations in the strict sense are like rights and duties: they remain in effect even when they cannot be fulfilled, or when it would be wrong to fulfill them. Thus it is one of the security guard's duties to check the back entrance at eleven, even though he would be wrong to fulfill that duty, because he is needed to apprehend a burglar at the front entrance. Similarly, I have an obligation to return the students' papers on Wednesday, even though it is not the case that I ought to do so. The nature of obligations, strictly construed, and how they are related to what persons ought to do, remains to be explained, but clearly they are not governed by the G* principles. As I stipulated in Section II, however, the principles are only intended to apply to what agents *ought* to do, not to what they have obligations in the strict sense to do, so this is not a genuine problem for the principles.

A third objection arises from the fact that the G* principles sometimes imply that an otherwise undesirable act would be right because performing it would lead the agent to avoid subsequent undesirable acts. It may appear that this necessarily leads to counterintuitive prescriptions in certain cases. Suppose Smith is holding up an old woman's pawnshop, and a family of six enters the shop. Unless Smith murders the woman right away, she will call for help; and if she calls, the family will respond, and Smith, given his vicious character and desperate frame of mind, will wind up murdering all six of them. It may appear that the G* principles imply that Smith (objectively) ought to murder the woman in order to prevent his

subsequently murdering the entire family, and many would find this prescription objectionable.²⁷

The G* principles do not necessarily have this result. The principle of derivative value they embody does require that the prevention of a subsequent mass murder must be taken into account when determining whether or not Smith ought to murder the woman. Whether or not this leads to a prescription for him to murder her, however, depends *in addition* on the theory of intrinsic value employed with the G* principles. There are theories of intrinsic value which may be used to avoid this result. An example of such a theory would be one which assigns intrinsic values to actions *indexed to times*, so that a murder performed now is worse than a murder performed in the future. If the theory assigns infinite negative value to any murder performed now, but only finite negative value to any murder performed in the future, then the G* principles used in conjunction with this theory would not justify Smith in murdering the woman now in order to prevent any finite number of murders in the future, since the sum of their disvalues would be less than the disvalue of the present murder. Thus the G* principles, when combined with an appropriate theory of intrinsic value, can avoid a prescription in this case which many would find counterintuitive.

It may seem, however, that such theories of intrinsic value are artificial. Thus it might be maintained that the principle of *derivative* value embodied in the G* principles is incorrect, since, when combined with most standard or natural theories of intrinsic value, it generates a prescription for Smith to murder the woman. In this vein the case might be used to argue for some alternative principle of derivative value—for example, one which implies that the fact that a present murder would prevent the agent from performing subsequent murders has no tendency whatsoever to show the present murder ought to be performed. I find such a principle implausible, however. First, I do not find the prescription for Smith to murder the woman counterintuitive. The case is a hard one, but his murdering her seems the best resolution of the facts as given. One should beware that the contrary intuition may stem from a view about what it would be *subjectively* right for him to do. In the situation as Smith views it, in which he must weigh the certainty of a grave present evil

²⁷ This problem was originally raised by Michael Bratman; the example itself was suggested by the editors of *The Philosophical Review*.

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against the mere probability of grave future evils, it may well be subjectively wrong for him to choose the former rather than risk the latter. But, once again, this does not affect the adequacy of the G* principles' prescription for what it would be *objectively* right for him to do. Second, it is difficult to formulate a coherent principle of derivative value which both generates the prescription for Smith not to murder the woman, and also generates intuitive prescriptions in other kinds of cases. Few would balk, I think, at requiring Smith to perform some lesser undesirable act, such as knocking the woman unconscious, in order to prevent his murdering the family. But why should the prevention of the family's murder contribute to the derivative value of his knocking her unconscious when it does not contribute to the derivative value of his murdering her? All things considered, then, I do not find this case to be a powerful counter-example to the G* principles.

The fourth objection arises from the fact that the G* principles appear to capitulate to weaknesses of character in cases where they imply that an otherwise undesirable act ought to be performed now in order to prevent the occurrence of even worse acts in the future. In some of these cases, the agent would perform the later acts because of false or inadequate beliefs about the circumstances. For example, in the Jones case the agent would fail to attend the faculty meeting if she went to the office because she would not realize the language requirement was to be discussed. But in other cases the agent would perform the later undesirable acts even though he understood their nature. In the case previously described, I would understand that my failing to grade the papers would be undesirable, but nevertheless that is what I would do. One might say such performances would result from a defect in the character of the agent. But it appears that prescribing a current undesirable act (for example, carrying home the books) because the agent would otherwise perform undesirable acts later on is simply *giving in* to the agent's weak character. Surely we cannot excuse agents for doing the undesirable thing now because their moral character is defective!

This objection overlooks the fact that the G* principles do *not* imply that one may simply accept one's character for better or worse. Moral character is the sort of thing which can often be changed, at least over the middle or long run. Thus the principles may imply an agent ought to perform an act which will lead him to *improve* his character. Consider for example a high school student from a highly

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conservative small town background. Although she is sceptical of the value system she has absorbed from her environment, she cannot change it *simply* by making a decision that it be different. She could change her values, however, by attending a large liberal university rather than the small religious college her parents advise her to attend. Since exposure to the university would effect a change in her values and ultimately alter for the better (let us suppose) the actions she would perform later in life, the G* principles imply that she ought to attend the university. Thus, although the principles may sometimes “capitulate” to an agent’s weak character, they do so only for the period of time that it is not under the agent’s control—that is, until he can arrange conditions that will change the undesirable aspect of his character. But this indicates that the G* principles treat defects in character quite realistically—as unfortunate traits to be taken into account where necessary, and eliminated where possible. Any other attitude towards defects in character seems irresponsible.²⁸

It is worth noting that sometimes the mere realization that one is likely to behave in an objectionable manner in the future is sufficient to spur one into overcoming the character weakness which would have led to the undesirable activity. Thus, in the grading case described above (pp. 478-479), my noting that I am likely to become so discouraged at the papers’ poor quality that I shall give up and watch television instead may shame me into resolving successfully not to be turned aside from such an important task. But in such a case the G* principles would no longer instruct me to carry the books instead of the papers home, because one of the relevant facts of the case—what I would actually do if I took the papers home—would be different from the one originally described. Thus attempting to apply the principles to one’s own case may be peculiarly difficult because that very endeavor alters the basis on which the principles must be applied. This phenomenon also explains why it may seem unsatisfactory to say to oneself, “If I take the papers home to grade, I’ll just get discouraged, so I might as well take the books instead.”

This case suggests a further, although related, objection to the G* principles. Suppose it is true that I would fail to grade the papers if I

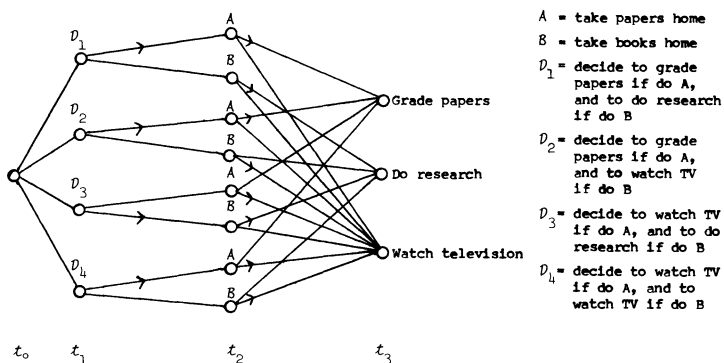
²⁸ Notice that the G* principles may also require one to act so as to obtain information the lack of which would otherwise lead one to perform an undesirable act in the future. Thus defects both in character and in knowledge must be remedied wherever possible (or more accurately, must be remedied if the cost, in terms of subsequent undesirable acts, does not outweigh the benefit, in terms of desirable acts).

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took them home—but the reason for this is that I have *already decided* not to grade them!²⁹ Apparently the principles imply that even in such a case as this, where my future act would be the upshot of an explicit decision, I would be right in taking the books home rather than the papers. But surely I commit *some* wrong in such a case; a wrong which the principles fail to ascribe to me.

Fortunately, an extended version of the G* principles can be used to identify the wrong which I commit. In many cases I have described, the agent would perform a future undesirable act *C*, if he first performed otherwise desirable act *B*, because of some disposition which could be altered by a prior act *A*. In such cases the G* principles imply that the agent ought to perform *A* in order to change his disposition. The case just described, however, points out that occasionally the disposition can be altered *directly* by a decision of the agent, made before *B*, not to do *C* if he does *B*. Thus it may be true that my resolving now to grade the papers if I took them home would *itself*—without the mediation of any intervening action—bring it about that I would grade them.

Now, decisions are not actions. But they are (presumably) under voluntary control, and they have causal effects. This may mean that a complete moral theory must assess decisions as well as actions. The G* principles could naturally be extended to include such a possibility by simply expanding the agent's sequences of possible "actions" to include the relevant possible decisions. The same principles could then be applied to *all* the nodes appearing on the resulting structure, which can be represented as follows. (Brief reflection shows it is necessary to view the possible decisions as complexes of conditional decisions.)



²⁹ This example was suggested to me by the editors of *The Philosophical Review*.

Assume that carrying the books home and carrying the papers home have equal intrinsic values, that grading papers is better than doing research, and that doing research is better than watching television. Assume also that if I decide at t_1 to do something Y after doing something X , then, if I do X , I will in fact do Y , and furthermore that I will perform at t_2 whichever act would be followed by the best sequence. Then application of the extended G^* principles implies that I ought to make decision D_1 (or decision D_2) at t_1 (since those decisions would be followed by the best sequences), take the papers home at t_2 , and grade them at t_3 . Such prescriptions satisfy our intuitions that it would be wrong for me to decide at t_1 not to grade the papers if I took them home, and then justify my taking the books home by appealing to this previous decision.

In most cases of this sort, I would have *repeated* opportunities before t_2 to make a decision regarding my grading of the papers if I took them home. Thus even if I make a wrong decision at one juncture, the extended G^* principles would instruct me to change my mind at the next juncture and make the correct decision. If there comes a point after which I no longer have the opportunity to make a decision regarding my grading the papers after taking them home, and at that point I make the wrong decision, then *after* that has occurred, the principles instruct me to take the books home instead, since there would be nothing I could do then to alter my future action. And these are surely plausible prescriptions. Working out a satisfactory version of the extended G^* principles is a complicated task which I shall not undertake here, but the possibility of doing so assures us that one may avoid the alleged counterexample while remaining within the spirit of the G^* principles as they have been expounded hitherto.

I believe the foregoing arguments show we need not worry that the G^* principles condone any *illegitimate* appeal to weakness of character as an excuse for performing an undesirable act. Nevertheless one might worry that the G^* principles render it impossible for us to criticize a person's weakness of character in some cases where we feel he clearly merits such criticism. For example, assume in the case described above that I carry home the books rather than the papers I have promised to grade, and then spend the evening doing research for my lectures. Since these are the acts the G^* principles prescribe, I shall have done everything that I ought to do. But if I fulfill my obligations, how can my character be defective, as we would all judge it to be?

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This objection rests on the erroneous notion that weakness of character is only revealed by failure to fulfill one's *actual* obligations. Since weakness of character is a dispositional trait, it is revealed by what one would do in merely *hypothetical* circumstances as well as by what one actually does in the real circumstances. My fulfilling all my actual obligations does not show my character to have no defect if I would fail to fulfill my obligations in a different situation. This is precisely what is true of me in the present case: although I follow the G* principles' prescriptions in the actual world, I would not do so in every possible world. Consider a possible world in which I carried home the papers rather than the books. In this world the principles would instruct me, after I arrived home, to grade the papers. But we have assumed that if I took the papers home I would wind up watching television instead. Thus there are possible circumstances in which I would fail to fulfill my obligations: a failure which would result from weakness of character. The G* principles, rather than preventing us from viewing my character as defective in this case, instead provide us with a test for *revealing* that weakness.

Finally, let us reexamine the relation between the G* principles and the F principles, which we previously rejected as principles of dated rightness. The G* principles base their prescription for a current act partly on the nature of the acts the agent would perform in hypothetical future situations, where what he would do in those future situations depends on his moral character, as well as upon his beliefs. Thus the prescription delivered by the G* principles for an actual agent may differ from the prescription which would be delivered by the principles for an 'ideal moral agent'—an agent who would do no wrong whatever the circumstances.³⁰ For example,

³⁰ There is no circularity involved in saying that an ideal moral agent is someone who would do no wrong, whatever the circumstances, and also saying that the acts which an ideal moral agent ought to perform are not identical with the acts a similarly situated imperfect agent ought to perform. Since each sequence open to an agent ends in some final choice, the last alternatives open to an agent are right or wrong in virtue of their intrinsic value alone. Having determined which of these last acts would be right (without having to ascertain what the agent would do next), it is possible to identify each such action as the one an ideal moral agent would perform at each terminal choice point, and then "work backwards" determining at each point which action would be right, given that its agent would do what was right (since he is an ideal moral agent) at the later junctures. In this way it is possible to determine without circularity what the obligations of an ideal moral agent would be.

while the principles instruct me (in the actual world) to carry home the books and spend the evening preparing my lectures, they would instruct an ideal moral agent to carry home the papers and spend the evening grading them. Hence the G* principles imply that one's obligations depend on one's limitations either of character or of knowledge.

This fact allows us to throw new light on the nature of the F principles. Reflection suggests that the F principles prescribe for an actual agent the *very same acts* that would be prescribed for him by the G* principles if he were an ideal moral agent. Thus we can understand the relation between the G* principles and the F principles as follows. The G* principles tell us what acts the agent ought to perform. The F principles, on the other hand, identify what his obligations would be if he were an ideal moral agent—that is, they tell us what acts it ought to be the case that he ought to perform. This explains the intuitive attractiveness the F principles hold for most people who consider them. Under this interpretation, the F principles and the G* principles cease to be rivals and become complementary sets of principles, each expressing a different, and important, moral conception.

X

I have argued that a moral statement must specify the time at which the obligation obtains as well as the time at which the act is to be performed. Once the necessity for such temporal indicators is recognized, two relatively unrecognized moral problems arise: the problem of determining under what conditions an agent has a present obligation to perform an act in the nonimmediate future, and the problem of determining how the moral status of a current act is affected by the value of the subsequent acts the agent might perform. I have proposed and argued for a set of principles of dated rightness and derivative value which I believe provide the correct solutions to these problems. Since these principles assess an act partly by reference to the nature of the subsequent acts it would in fact lead the agent to perform, we may understand them as constituting one interpretation for the view expressed in the opening

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quotation: "One must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain; not the higher act which one bungles."³¹

³¹ For their assistance with earlier versions of this paper, I would like to thank John G. Bennett, Brian Chellas, Alvin I. Goldman, Brian Loar, Louis Loeb, Charles Stevenson, Richmond Thomason, and Kendall Walton.

As final revisions on the paper were being made, it came to my attention that J. Howard Sobel considers some of the same issues in his paper "Utilitarianism and Past and Future Mistakes," forthcoming in *Nous*. Although he examines these issues within the narrower context of purely utilitarian normative theories, many of his remarks are illuminating for the assessment of the broader principles I propose in this paper.

The final version of the paper was written under the American Association of University Women's Minnie Cumnock Blodgett Endowed Fellowship. I am also grateful for facilities provided by the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.