Example of a Decent Solution of a Philosophical Exercise

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1. The Exercise

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

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

Now, it seems that situations are conceivable in which there is no best thing to do. For example, a situation in which an agent can choose from infinitely many actions, one better than the other. (If you are a utilitarian, you might think of a situation in which there is no limit to the amount of happiness the agent can cause: 100 units, 1,000 units, 10,000 units of happiness, and so forth.) Discuss the problem that the »no best action« possibility raises for an optimizing morality, and possible ways out of that problem.

2. An Example of a Decent Solution, without Comments

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

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

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

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

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

Fortunately, another interpretation of (OPT) is available:

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

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

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

3. The Same Example, with Comments

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

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

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Margin comments:

Cases, claims, or other items that play an important role are baptized. If one such item is a close relative of another, the names reflect this.

A paraphrase of the task is included in the introduction, as part of »setting the stage«.

The question is mirrored, saliently, in the answer. If the question was about »problems«, »solutions«, »objections«, …, then such words (or similar ones: »difficulty«, »way out«, »counter-argument«, …) play an important role in the answer. The answer is an answer to the question, not a rhapsody in the neighbourhood of the question.

If possible, there is an overall structure to the answer: its points form a logical sequence, and the logical connection provides the transition between them.

Where it is helpful, different meanings or variations of terms or claims are distinguished, and the distinction structures the discussion. (For example, if one version of a claim has a problem that another version avoids.)

Layout: claims that are discussed are set off from the rest of the text.

Things are explained, explicitly and instructively: with comparisons, examples, illustrations, and so forth, and with a pleasant flow. The reader does not have to struggle to understand the message of individual sentences or the connection between sentences, because the author has put herself into the reader's shoes and has struggled to express things – the individual points and the logical connection between them – as accessibly and clearly as possible.

Layout: a new thought or chunk of thoughts (for instance, a new problem, argument, alternative, …) is treated to a new paragraph.

The length of this example of a solution is not representative. There are also exercises that can be solved in three or four sentences.