1. Introduction

The question at the center of the Actualism-Possibilism debate in ethics is this: do agents have reason to avoid putting themselves into situations in which they are likely to make mistakes? For example, if Joe is a recovering alcoholic, does this fact give him a reason to avoid going out to the bar with friends, or does it just give him a reason to avoid alcoholic beverages while at the bar? Let us suppose that the payoffs are as follows:

- Joe stays home = zero utiles.
- Joe goes out, and then does not drink = one utile.
- Joe goes out, and then drinks = negative ten utiles.

Let us further suppose that although Joe is capable of going out to the bar without drinking, it is in fact nearly certain that if he goes to the bar then—even if he firmly resolves ahead of time to stay on the wagon—once he gets there he will end up choosing to drink. Common sense, I think, will say that under these circumstances he should stay home; going out is an extremely imprudent choice.

Readers familiar with the Actualism-Possibilism debate will recognize this as a variant of the "Professor Procrastinate" case from Jackson & Pargetter (1986: 235-236)—with other similar cases having been discussed at least as early as Goldman (1976: 466-470). They will also recognize that there is not a consensus in favor of the common-sense option. The two positions are roughly as follows:

Actualism: when evaluating an agent's options in the context of a particular decision, we should make realistic predictions about what he will do in the future.

and:
Possibilism: when evaluating an agent's options in the context of a particular decision, we should assume that he will make optimal choices in all future decisions.

Of course, neither of these, on their own, say anything about what Joe ought to do. They are meant to be plugged into a theory of rightness, e.g.:

Maximizing Consequentialism: the right option to pick with respect to a particular decision is whichever one will have the best consequences; options with suboptimal consequences are wrong.

For present purposes I shall assume that "best consequences" equates to "most utiles".

I shall refer to the combined views as "Maximizing Actualism" and "Maximizing Possibilism". Both of these views agree that if Joe goes out, he should not then drink: not drinking yields eleven more utiles than drinking. However, they disagree about whether he should go out. According to Maximizing Actualism, he should stay home: what will actually happen if he goes out is that he will end up with negative ten utiles; since this is worse than the zero utiles he could get by staying home, staying home is the better choice. According to Maximizing Possibilism, on the other hand, he should go out: if he goes out and then acts in the best possible way thereafter, he will end up with one utile; since this is better than the zero utiles he could get by staying home, going out is the better choice.

The way this debate usually goes is for the Maximizing Actualist to argue that his view is less gravely flawed than the Maximizing Possibilist's, and for the Maximizing Possibilist to argue the converse. My thesis is a little different, however. Although my sympathies are definitely with Actualism, I will not be arguing that Maximizing Actualism is less gravely flawed than Maximizing Possibilism. Instead, I will be arguing that they are both gravely flawed. However, the former's flaw lies not with Actualism but rather with Maximizing Consequentialism. The view I support instead is Scalar Consequentialism:
Scalar Consequentialism: with respect to a particular decision, one option is better than another to the extent that it will have better consequences; however, it is not meaningful to describe any options as "right" or "wrong".

I will argue that Scalar Actualism can avoid the most serious problems faced by both Maximizing views. I believe that this constitutes both a novel defense of Actualism and a novel argument in favor of Scalar Consequentialism.

2. The Problem with Maximizing Actualism

The biggest problem with Maximizing Actualism, which I feel is expressed most clearly by Zimmerman (1996: 191-193), is that it is borderline-incoherent. When asked "Should Joe go out or stay home?", the Maximizing Actualist answers "Joe should stay home, since zero utiles is better than negative ten utiles". But when asked "Should Joe go out and drink, go out and not drink, or stay home?", the Maximizing Actualist answers "Joe should go out and not drink, since one utile is better than negative ten utiles and also better than zero utiles". So Joe should go out and not drink, but also should not go out at all. At best, this constitutes unhelpful advice for Joe; at worst, given some reasonable assumptions about deontic logic—e.g. that "the agent ought to A and B" implies "the agent ought to A and the agent ought to B"—it is a straightforward contradiction.

Actualists' best hope of avoiding this problem is to try to deny that Joe, at the time he is deciding whether to go out, really has the option of going out but not drinking. The best version of this move is the "Securitist" view offered by Portmore (2011: 162-167), which amounts to roughly: a sequence of actions A, B, etc, only counts as an option for the agent at time T just in case the agent is capable at time T of adopting some set of attitudes and intentions which would result in him performing actions A, B, etc. If asked "Should Joe go out and drink, go out and not drink, or stay home?", the Securitist—since we have specified that no amount of advance resolution on Joe's part will keep him
from deciding to drink after reaching the bar—answers "Joe is faced with no such decision", and so avoids contradicting the claim that Joe should stay home.

However, if Actualists take this sort of approach—deny that "go out but do not drink" counts as an option at the time that Joe is deciding whether to go out—they are left with a new problem. Suppose that Joe does, in fact, stay home. Then "go out but do not drink" never even becomes an option. So Joe has acted rightly at every turn; true, he had some unfortunate dispositions, but unless he at some point made a choice to acquire those dispositions, his behavior is completely ideal: he never had the opportunity to do any better than he did do.

To see why I find this unsatisfying, let us change the scenario to something that has the same structure but is higher-stakes. Suppose that Dr. Joseph is a researcher at the Centers for Disease Control. A deadly new disease has broken out, and it is his job to study it and find a cure. However, if he is careless while studying the disease sample, he will infect his coworkers, thereby start a second outbreak, and make the disease much worse. So the payoffs are as follows:

- Dr. Joseph stays home = one million people die.
- Dr. Joseph goes to work, and does a conscientious job = nobody dies.
- Dr. Joseph goes to work, and does a careless job = eleven million people die.

Suppose that Dr. Joseph stays home, and when asked for an explanation says: "I have been feeling homicidal toward my coworkers lately, due to disagreeing with their political views. I judged that if I went to work today, I would be strongly tempted to 'accidentally' mishandle the disease in order to infect them. I did not trust myself to withstand this temptation, so chose not to go to work at all."

It seems to me to be intuitively obvious that if this is Dr. Joseph's reason for letting a million innocent people die when it was his job to save them, then—even if it is true that he would have committed mass murder if he had gone into work—then he is not a candidate for a "never did anything wrong in his life" award. He could have chosen to go to work, and then he could have chosen to resist temptation and handle the disease sample conscientiously; because he failed to do these things that he
could have done, a million people are dead. I take Greenspan (1978: 78) to be expressing a similar intuition about a professor failing to do her job as grad placement director. Saying "I did not do my job because even if I had started doing it, I would not have finished" is a lame excuse for not doing one's job when other people are depending on it.

3. The Problem with Maximizing Possibilism

Meanwhile, the main problem with Maximizing Possibilism, at least from my perspective, is that it gives an obviously wrong answer to all of these cases. It says that Joe should go out to the bar with his friends—or that Dr. Joseph should go to work to cure the disease—in spite of the fact that these actions will foreseeably lead to disaster. As mentioned by Jackson & Pargetter (1986: 237-238), among others, if this sort of advice were being offered by a friend rather than by an ethical theory, we would rightly judge it to be terrible advice. And as I said at the outset, it is just common sense that recovering alcoholics should avoid bars, even when avoiding bars comes with a cost; Goldman (1976: 469-470) has a similar example of a person taking a birth control pill because she does not trust herself to follow an alternative contraceptive plan that requires good decision-making in the heat of the moment.

Although I feel that the above problem is sufficient justification for rejecting Maximizing Possibilism, I also want to raise a structural worry. As Sobel (1976: 207-210) points out, it instructs the agent to ignore his own foreseeable future mistakes, but not to ignore other people's foreseeable future mistakes. I view this asymmetry as a serious flaw. For one thing, it means that Possibilism's verdicts hinge on metaphysical questions about the persistence conditions of personal identity—questions that there is no realistic prospect of resolving within the foreseeable future. But, worse, it represents the abandonment the agent-neutrality which some philosophers—e.g. McNaughton & Rawling (1992)—have identified as a defining virtue of Consequentialism. For example, suppose that there are two candidates for public office; suppose that both are capable of doing a good job if elected, but, since
power corrupts, neither would actually do a good job if elected; and, finally, suppose that each of them is aware of all of these facts. Possibilism will instruct each candidate to try to win the election, since the consequences of either candidate winning and behaving optimally thereafter are better than the consequences of losing given the foreseeable misbehavior of the candidate's opponent. So if the candidates each have money in their war chests that could be used for zero-sum campaign advertising or could instead be used for socially-beneficial causes that would not alter either candidate's odds of winning, Possibilism potentially instructs both of them to engage in zero-sum campaigning. I find it extremely difficult to believe that this is the right choice.

4. Scalar Consequentialism

Although the real focus of this paper is the Actualism-Possibilism debate, I must now digress into a different issue entirely: the debate over the demandingness of Consequentialism. Maximizing Consequentialism is widely criticized for being too demanding. It leaves no room for the intuitive category of supererogatory actions described by Urmson (1958), such as throwing oneself on a grenade to save one's comrades; it holds that any action with good consequences, no matter how onerous to the agent, to be ethically obligatory. As famously pointed out by Williams (1973: 108-118), it does not even leave room for personal integrity: it requires the agent to abandon his personal convictions and projects the moment doing so will have better consequences than not doing so.

If one wishes to retain the idea that the ethical status of an action depends on its consequences, but to abandon Maximizing Consequentialism, one alternative—defended e.g. by Slote (1984)—is Satisficing Consequentialism, which says that an action can be right even if it does not have the best consequences, as long as its consequences are in some sense "good enough". However, this approach leads to serious difficulties, with its opponents—e.g. Bradley (2006)—persuasively arguing that there is no plausible way to define "good enough" without allowing some obviously-bad actions to pass the threshold.
It is within the context of this debate that Scalar Consequentialism arose, first described by Slote (1985: 76-91) and most famously advocated by Norcross (2006). It denies that actions can be classified as "right" and "wrong" at all, holding instead that ethics should be understood as essentially comparative: if one understands how an action compares to its alternatives—which alternatives it is better than, which alternatives it is worse than, and to what extent—then one knows everything there is to know about its ethical standing. There is no further fact about which options are good enough to count as "right" and which options are not.

I find this view very attractive. To see why, consider the following example, which I am adapting from Norcross (2006: 220-221): suppose that an agent has bought all the necessities of life, has $100 left over, and is deciding how much to donate to charity and how much to spend on luxuries for himself. Suppose that how much good his donation does increases linearly with its size: the first dollar he donates to charity produces the same amount of additional justice, additional net happiness, etc., as the hundredth dollar he donates to charity. The Maximizing Consequentialist wants to say that giving anything less than the full $100 is ethically impermissible. The Satisficing Consequentialist, on the other hand, may draw the line somewhere else, e.g. identifying $80 as the minimum acceptable donation. They then proceed to argue with one another. When the agent increases his donation from $60 to $80, does that increase make the difference between "wrong" and "right", or does it merely make his behavior "less wrong but still unacceptable"? When he increases it again from $80 to $100, should we describe that as the step from "wrong" to "right", or merely as a step from "permissible" to "supererogatory"?

The Scalar Consequentialist position as I understand it is to decline to join in that argument. If what matters ethically is the amount of justice, happiness, etc., in the world, then the step from $60 to $80 is neither more nor less important than the step from $80 to $100; when weighing ethical reasons against selfish ones and deciding how much willpower to exert in favor of the ethically-better choice, the agent should give the same ethical weight to each step. If labeling one step as the step that makes
the difference between "right" and "wrong" is supposed to imply that it is more ethically significant than the other—i.e. that it has weightier reasons in its favor, or justifies a larger expenditure of willpower than the other—then it is an error to affix those labels to any step. If the labels are not supposed to have any implications about the strength of the agent's reasons, then the disagreement between the Maximizer and the Satisficer is not really a disagreement about ethics at all, but instead some other sort of disagreement—e.g. a semantic disagreement about how English speakers use the word "right", or an anthropological disagreement about how members of our culture react to different behaviors—disguised as an ethical one. So it is more accurate and/or clearer to speak in terms of "better" and "worse" rather than "right" and "wrong": $100 is better than $80, $80 is better than $60, etc., and there are no other ethical facts besides ones like these.

Of course there are also criticisms of Scalar Consequentialism. The most prominent is probably Lawlor's (2009) argument that a moral theory should not just tell us how strong a moral reason we have to choose one option rather than another, but should also tell us whether that moral reason is conclusive—e.g. whether it should outweigh whatever non-moral considerations the agent might also be taking into account. I do not personally find this criticism convincing: just as I think that there is no uniquely-right amount of money for the agent in the above scenario to donate to charity, I think that there is no uniquely-right amount of weight to assign moral reasons relative to nonmoral ones; giving morality incrementally more weight in one's motivational structure is always an improvement, and I do not think it is useful to single out any particular threshold at which one's motivational structure starts counting as "reasonable" rather than "unreasonable".

However, it is not really my purpose here to engage in that debate. My thesis is not that Scalar Consequentialism is the right view, but merely that embracing Scalar Consequentialism helps with the Actualism-Possibilism debate. The latter claim, if correct, would be one point in favor of Scalar Consequentialism; I will leave it others to evaluate whether it, in combination with the other points in favor of Scalar Consequentialism, is convincing enough to outweigh the points against.
5. Scalar Actualism Avoids the Problems

I want to make two claims about Joe's case. First, I want to claim that it is a mistake for Joe to go to the bar; since he is likely to drink after doing so, he would do better to stay home. Possibilism cannot say that. The consequences of going out, when considered under the assumption that he will pick the best possible choice in all future decisions, are better than the consequences of staying home, so the Maximizing Possibilist will say that going out is right, the Satisficing Possibilist will say that going out is right and possibly even supererogatory, and the Scalar Possibilist will say that going out is better than staying home. And all of them say these things in spite of the fact that they would give opposite verdicts if the mistake that would be made after going to the bar were going to be made by someone else instead of by Joe himself. So much for Possibilism.

Second, I want to claim that Joe's decision—or especially Dr. Joseph's decision—to stay home is subject to criticism. Maximizing Actualism cannot do that: it says that since staying home has better consequences than going out, it is the right action. Satisficing Actualism's situation is complicated, so I will return to it in Section 6, but the short version of why it also does do what I want is this: since "ought" implies "can", staying home and going out cannot both be impermissible, so at least one of them must have good enough consequences to count as "right"; since the consequences of staying home are better than the consequences of going out, the fact that one of them has good enough consequences to count as "right" implies that staying home has good enough consequences to count as "right"; therefore Satisficing Actualism does not have the resources to criticize Joe for staying home.

Scalar Actualism offers the best of both worlds. It lets us say that Joe acts better by staying home than he would have acted by going out, but acts worse by staying home than he would have acted by going out and staying sober. If we classified going out and staying home as both "wrong", we would be denying that "ought" implies "can" with respect to the narrowly-defined decision of whether to go out or not; if we classified going-out-and-staying-sober and staying home as both "right", we
would be denying that staying home is morally objectionable with respect to the broadly-defined
decision of how to spend his evening; but there is no contradiction in saying "although staying home is
not 'wrong' per se, it is worse than going-out-and-staying-sober; and although it is not 'right' per se, it is
better than going-out-simpliciter". Assuming transitivity, this implies that going-out-and-staying-sober
is better than going-out-simpliciter, but that is not at all surprising or problematic when the
consequences of staying sober are so positive.

I would also like to take a moment to mention an article by Woodard (2009) which—although
focused entirely on the Actualism-Possibilism debate and never mentioning Scalar Consequentialism—
nevertheless bears a certain resemblance to my view. In it, he suggests that instead of saying that the
agent's decision should be based only on how the agent would actually respond to future decision-
points, and also instead of saying that it should be based only on how the agent could best respond to
future decision-points, participants in the Actualism-Possibilism debate should look for a "moderate"
theory that holds both types of facts to be ethically relevant. He never spells out exactly what such a
theory would look like, but I think the Scalar Actualism that I am offering fits the bill. He also claims
that although the "moderate" view would be distinct from both Actualism and Possibilism, it would be
more directly opposed to Possibilism; if the "moderate" alternative to Maximizing Actualism and
Maximizing Possibilism turns out to be Scalar Actualism, that claim will have been borne out. Finally,
he claims that participants in the Actualism-Possibilism debate should worry less about characterizing
the behavior of the "ought" operator within deontic logic and more about characterizing the behavior of
the various ethical reasons which underlie it; a move to Scalar Consequentialism, which eliminates the
"ought" operator entirely in favor of exclusively focusing on comparative judgments, is an admittedly-
极端的 way of obeying that prescription. Obviously "replicability" does not apply to philosophy the
same way that does to science; however, if the reader will take my word for it that I encountered
Woodard's paper only after formulating Scalar Actualism, I think the coincidence that what he is
requesting is so similar to what I am offering is at least a little bit of further evidence that there might be something to both our views.

6. Is Scalar Consequentialism Necessary?

The reader might object to my claim that embracing Scalar Consequentialism is necessary for recognizing that both "Joe acts worse by staying home than he could act by going out and staying sober" and "Joe acts better by staying home that he would act if he went out" are ethically relevant considerations bearing upon Joe's decision. In particular, a Maximizing Possibilist might think that he can get these claims just by acknowledging that wrongness comes in degrees: i.e. that although the only right option is the one with the best consequences, some wrong options are more wrong than others due to having worse consequences than others.

To explore this idea further, observe that the Maximizing Possibilist identifies the consequences of going out with the consequences of going-out-and-staying-sober. If he believes that wrongness comes in degrees, he will therefore say that staying home is slightly wrong: it costs one utile relative to going out. On the other hand, after going out, drinking is very wrong: it costs eleven utiles relative to not drinking. So the Maximizing Possibilist can say "Joe acts rightly by going out and staying sober, slightly wrongly by staying home, and very wrongly by going out and drinking; so staying home is better than going out and drinking, but worse than going out and staying sober".

Unfortunately, that is not quite what was asked for. I want a theory that says not just that staying home is better than going-out-and-drinking, but also that it is better than going-out-simply; if Joe asks "is it better for me to go out or stay home?", I think the correct answer is "stay home". Maximizing Possibilism cannot give that answer; although it can identify "go out and get drunk" as even more wrong than staying home, it locates one hundred percent of the wrongness of that course of action as occurring during the "get drunk" stage, holding that the "go out" stage is perfectly right. So it
still fails to advise Joe to plan for his own weakness, and so is still subject to all of the criticisms from Section 3 above.

Similarly, just as a Maximizing Possibilist can try to argue that wrongness comes in degrees, a Satisficing Actualist can try to argue that rightness comes in degrees. As I said above, since staying home has better consequences than going out, and since the ought-implies-can principle prohibits the classification of both of those options as impermissible, the Satisficing Actualist must classify staying home as "permissible". But if he does not take the Securitist route, and instead insists that going-out-and-making-good-choices-afterward does count as an option at the time Joe or Dr. Joseph is deciding whether to go out, then he can observe that it has better consequences than another permissible option, and is therefore not merely permissible but also supererogatory. So unlike a Maximizing Actualist—who, like all Maximizing Consequentialists, is committed to the idea that rightness requires perfection and thus to dismissing as ridiculous the idea of one right action being "more right" than another—a Satisficing Actualist can say Joe acts more laudably by going-out-and-making-good-choices-afterward than by staying home. It is not exactly a ringing criticism of staying home, since he also has to say "staying home is perfectly acceptable", but it is better than nothing. Especially since the Scalar Actualist view that I prefer, although it does not say "staying home is perfectly acceptable", also does not say "staying home is unacceptable". For me to harp on Satisficing Actualism's failure to classify staying home as "wrong" would be like a grey pot accusing a black kettle of being non-white: not quite as bad as the more familiar version of the cliché, but still rather disingenuous.

Unfortunately, this type of Satisficing Actualism has a bigger problem: the deontic logic issue from Section 2 rears its head again. I am inclined to think that if it is permissible for the agent to A-and-B, and if the agent will be capable of Bing after Aing, then it is permissible for the agent to A. So if the Satisficing Actualist classifies going-out-and-making-good-choices-afterward as "permissible and supererogatory", he must classify going-out-simpliciter as also being at least permissible. And since he identifies the consequences of going-out-simpliciter with the consequences of going-out-and-making-
badChoicesAfterward, this means classifying going-out-and-making-bad-choices-afterward as permissible. So this version of a Satisficing Actualist ends up saying "the Scalar Actualist is entirely right about the relative betterness ordering of Joe's options, but I would like to add the additional information that all of those options—even the one resulting in total catastrophe—are permissible." I find this position unattractive; if one is not going to classify any options as "wrong", I do not see anything to be gained by classifying them all as "right" rather than focusing solely on which are better than which others.

7. Conclusion

I have defended the thesis that embracing a Scalar view of morality—replacing the absolute notions of "right" and "wrong" with comparative notions of "better than" and "worse than"—helps with the Actualism-Possibilism debate: specifically, Scalar Actualism avoids what I have presented as the biggest problems with Maximizing Actualism and also what I have presented as the biggest problems with Possibilism. I have also explained why merely recognizing that "right" and/or "wrong" come in degrees, while not abolishing them entirely or at least watering them down so far as to make them useless, is not sufficient to avoid those problems. I have not, however, offered a rigorous defense of Scalar Consequentialism against its criticisms, since I have nothing particularly original to say about that debate. So where does that leave us?

Well, first, insofar as the reader—in spite of my failure to address the demandingness debate in any detail—views Scalar Consequentialism as a live option within that debate, my argument that Scalar Actualism avoids some of the problems of Maximizing Actualism should raise the reader's credence in Actualism. Second, and relatedly: I suspect that there are many participants in the Actualism-Possibilism debate who do not believe in any sort of Consequentialism at all, but who are just using Maximizing Consequentialism as a simplifying assumption so as to enable their theories to render unambiguous verdicts about different thought experiments. The takeaway for those participants is that
it is an unsafe simplifying assumption which does not merely isolate the Actualism-Possibilism debate from broader issues in ethical theory but also potentially *distorts* the Actualism-Possibilism debate.

The third and final point is that insofar as the reader views *Actualism* as a live option within the Actualism-Possibilism debate in spite of the bullets that Actualists have to bite when their view is combined with Maximizing or Satisficing Consequentialism, my argument that Scalar Actualism can avoid those bullets should raise the reader's credence in Scalar Consequentialism as an alternative to Maximizing or Satisficing Consequentialism. There are many factors to be weighed within the demandingness-of-Consequentialism debate, but the fact that embracing a Scalar view enables an attractive position within a different debate at least counts as one additional consideration in favor of Scalar Consequentialism.
References