

(forthcoming in *Ethics*, please cite published version)

Transmission Failures*

Stephen J. White

Abstract: According to a natural view of instrumental normativity, if you ought to do ϕ , and doing ψ is a necessary means for you to do ϕ , then you ought to do ψ . In “Instrumental Normativity: In Defense of the Transmission Principle,” Benjamin Kiesewetter defends this principle against certain actualist-inspired counterexamples. In this article I argue that Kiesewetter’s defense of the transmission principle fails. His arguments rely on certain principles—Joint Satisfiability and Reason Transmission—which we should not accept in the unqualified forms needed to establish his conclusion.

Many of the things we ought to do on any given day are things we ought to do because they are necessary for other things we ought to do. You ought to see your doctor today, let’s suppose. In order to do that, you have to take the day off from work. According to an intuitive and pleasingly simple account of instrumental normativity, it follows straightaway from these two propositions that you ought to take the day off from work. It’s this simple account that Benjamin Kiesewetter sets out to defend in his paper, “Instrumental Normativity: In Defense of the Transmission Principle”—an account he formulates as

The transmission principle: If A ought to ϕ , and ψ -ing is a necessary means for A to ϕ , then A ought to ψ .¹

Some philosophers have thought, however, that things are not so simple. To use John Broome’s example, although you ought to go to the doctor, you know, or are reasonably confident, that if you take the day off, you will not actually go to the doctor. Instead, you will sit at home feeling anxious, getting no work done. Indeed, taking the day off without actually going

to the doctor is worse in every relevant respect than going to work. Could it still be the case that you should take the day off? ^{2, 3} If not, then we must reject the transmission principle.

Kiesewetter argues, however, that cases like this should not lead us to abandon this straightforward account of instrumental normativity. He claims that the fundamentally “actualist” assumptions that underlie the putative counterexamples are inconsistent with the role that (the relevant sort of) *ought*-judgments play in practical deliberation. Moreover, the relevant intuitions can, he thinks, be explained without rejecting the transmission principle.

I do not think Kiesewetter’s response to the problem is successful. In what follows I will first describe Kiesewetter’s two central objections to the actualist interpretation of cases like Broome’s, which interpretation forces us to reject the transmission principle. I’ll then present and argue against Kiesewetter’s alternative, *transmission*-friendly interpretation of the cases. Finally, I will return to his arguments against actualism and show why, in this context, they fail.

1. THE OBJECTIONS TO ACTUALISM

Actualists hold that what a person ought to do at a given time can depend on what that person will subsequently go on to do (freely and intentionally).⁴ By contrast, possibilists deny this. They hold that what one ought to do at a certain time can depend on what one will then be *in a position* to freely and intentionally do. But according to possibilists, whether one will, or is likely to, do what one will be in a position to do is not relevant.

It’s natural to interpret our intuitions about Broome’s example in actualist terms. It seems to make a difference that you are unlikely to go to the doctor if you take the day off. And according to the actualist, because you won’t go, you should not take the day off. Nevertheless, it is still true that you should see the doctor today. Taking the day off work and seeing your doctor

is the best thing for you to do; hence, you ought to do it (given that you are free to do so). The fact that you *won't* do it does not change this. But this is precisely why the case, on the actualist interpretation, is a counterexample to the transmission principle. Although you should [take the day off and see your doctor], and taking the day off is clearly necessary for this course of action, it's not the case that you should take the day off. It appears the transmission principle is false.

Kiesewetter objects that the actualist interpretation of the example cannot be correct. He provides two principal arguments for this conclusion.⁵ The first is that the actualist account is inconsistent with the deliberative role played by judgments about what one ought to do. The sense of “ought” for which Kiesewetter claims the transmission principle holds expresses a concept that plays a distinctive role in practical deliberation. An agent's judgment about what, in this sense, she ought to do represents an all-things-considered verdict that constitutes the conclusion of her deliberation about what to do. No further question about whether she is to do what she *ought* to do is intelligible. In this sense, then, an agent's belief that she ought to do something rationally commits her to intending to do it. Failure to intend to do what she judges she ought is *akratic*, and thus irrational.

According to Kiesewetter, given that it is this *deliberative* sense of “ought” that is at issue, the following *joint satisfiability* principle must be true:

Joint satisfiability: If A ought to ϕ and A ought to ψ , then it is possible for A to [ϕ and ψ].⁶

The reason that joint satisfiability must hold for the deliberative “ought,” is that otherwise there could be cases in which an agent would be rationally committed, in virtue of true and justified beliefs about what she ought to do in some situation, to intending to perform what she

knows to be incompatible actions. But this is not plausible. Intending to perform multiple actions that one knows are not jointly possible is itself irrational. Thus, as Kieseewetter writes, “it follows that agents in such situations would be necessarily irrational just because they believe the truth about what they ought to do.”⁷ Such agents either knowingly form incompatible intentions, or they are in one way or another, *akratic*, in that they do not intend to do something they believe they ought to do.

A closely related point here is that, if we have a case for which joint satisfiability fails, then it looks like the relevant *ought*-judgments cannot play their normative role of bringing the agent’s practical deliberation to a close. If one judges that one ought to ϕ and that one ought to ψ but that one cannot do both, then it seems there is a further question about which of these actions to take that has not yet been answered. But if so, then the concept that figures in these judgments cannot be the one we were after—viz., the one that figures in judgments that constitute the all-things-considered rational conclusions of deliberation.⁸

Now, the problem with the actualist treatment of cases like Broome’s is that it is inconsistent with joint satisfiability. The actualist claims the right thing to say, about the example we’ve been discussing, is that although it’s true that you ought to go to the doctor, since you won’t, you ought to go to work. But it was stipulated that you cannot both go to work *and* go to the doctor. So, if it is really true that you ought to do both of these things, joint satisfiability must be false.

Kieseewetter’s second argument against actualism and in favor of the transmission principle comes at the end of his essay and relies on what he takes to be a more fundamental principle:

Reason transmission: If A has a reason to ϕ and ψ -ing is an incompatible alternative to ϕ -ing, then A has an equally strong reason not to ψ .⁹

Reason transmission is an intuitive principle. As Kieseewetter points out, we frequently cite, as a reason *not* to do something (say, go to the Portishead concert), the fact that we have good reasons to do something else instead (go to the Radiohead concert), which is not compatible with doing the first thing.¹⁰

But notice, if we assume that what you ought to do depends on what you have most reason to do, then reason transmission entails the transmission principle.¹¹ To maintain, with the actualist, that you ought to see your doctor and, at the same time, that you ought to do something incompatible with seeing your doctor, namely, go to work, we would have to reject, not only the original instrumental transmission principle, but the more general *reason transmission* principle.

Is this too high a price to pay? Whether it is will depend, in part, on what else we can say to make sense of our intuitions in the type of case that Broome's example illustrates.

2. WIDE-SCOPE OBLIGATIONS¹²

Suppose we agree with Kieseewetter that the probable pointlessness and unnecessary difficulty associated with taking the day off work, given the likelihood that you won't use the time to see your doctor, are not sufficient to establish that you should not take the day off. Still, it doesn't seem plausible that you should simply ignore these things. And in general, it is hard to believe that there is no normatively significant distinction between the second best thing one can do and the worst thing one can do. But if we accept the transmission principle, how are we to explain the sense that one should somehow take into account, in guiding one's reasoning and action, the fact that there are better and worse ways to fall short of the best?

Kiesewetter suggests that we can capture the relevant intuitions here by appealing to obligations, or *oughts*, that range over conditionals, rather than applying to particular actions. Thus, in addition to its being the case that you ought to see your doctor, and that you ought to take the day off, it's also the case that:

(W): You ought to make sure that, if you will not see your doctor, you do not take the day off.¹³

The idea is that the entire conditional falls under the scope of the “ought.” As such, there is more than one way to satisfy it: you can make the consequent true or you can make the antecedent false. That is why being subject to this “wide-scope” obligation is consistent with the other things you should do. Although it may be that, as a matter of fact, you will not see your doctor, we cannot infer from this, together with (W), that you should not take the day off. For it remains true that you *ought* to see your doctor, and thereby make the conditional true by falsifying the antecedent. Kiesewetter's point, though, is that this gives us a consistent way of capturing the intuition that there is at least some sense in which you would be right not to take the day off, given the likelihood that you won't go to the doctor.¹⁴

The question is whether appealing to (W) actually helps to accommodate our intuitions about what is normatively relevant in your situation. Our sense is that the fact that things will be worse if you to take the day off, given that you won't use the time to go to the doctor, has some normative significance—it's something that needs to be taken into account in some way. Does (W) capture this intuition?

The first thing to note is that it is not enough merely to point out that you ought to make it true that, if you won't see your doctor, you don't take the day off. To do justice to our intuitions about the case, it must also be that this claim about what you ought to do is at least partly

grounded in the fact that it would be particularly bad if you were to take the day off without going to the doctor. The problem is that (W) seems to follow simply from the fact that you ought to see your doctor. If you ought to see your doctor, then you ought to make it true that, if you will not see your doctor, you do not take the day off, precisely by making the antecedent of that conditional false. But if that's right, then it is just irrelevant to the truth of (W) that it would be bad—pointless, anxiety-producing, etc.—if you were to take the day off without going to the doctor. The obligation to make sure that, if you won't go to the doctor, you don't take the day off, evidently has nothing to do with these evaluative facts. You would be subject to (W) even if it would be *better* for you to take the day off, without seeing your doctor, than to go to work (say, because you're contagious). (W) does not, therefore, seem to account adequately for the intuition that the benefits of going to work versus just sitting at home are in some way normatively significant.

To appreciate the point, consider a parallel hypothesis. One might point out that, in the imagined scenario, it's also the case that

(T): You ought to make sure that, if you will not see your doctor, you wear a tinfoil hat. The proponent of this view will hasten to add, in response to any raised eyebrows, that of course she does not think you ought to wear a tinfoil hat, even supposing you won't see your doctor. Rather, you ought to make this conditional true by falsifying the antecedent—that is, by seeing your doctor.

Now, it's clear that, if (T) is true, it is true merely in virtue of the fact that you ought to see your doctor. We have no reason to think that this obligation depends on or reflects anything about what would happen if you not only failed to see your doctor, but also declined to wear a

tinfoil hat. Put differently, we cannot infer from the truth of (T) that it would actually matter one way or another whether you wear a tinfoil hat, assuming you do *not* see your doctor.

But then, it seems, we should say the same about (W). We cannot infer from (W) that there would be any reason to care whether or not you take the day off, given that, in fact, you will not see your doctor. Nor does the fact that you've satisfied this wide-scope obligation seem to explain the intuitive sense in which you've gotten *something* right when you go to work, instead of taking the day off. For compare: it may be true that you ought to make sure that, if you don't see your doctor, you wear a tinfoil hat; but there doesn't seem to be any intuitive sense in which you get something right if, though you don't see your doctor, you do put on your tinfoil hat. If, therefore, the wide-scope obligation (W) is on a par with the wide-scope obligation (T), then it simply doesn't do justice to the intuitions about Broome's case that Kieseewetter is trying to accommodate.

Presumably, Kieseewetter will want to deny that (T) is on a par with (W)—that it is a normative fact of the same order. To make this case, it needs to be shown that the latter has some normative force or relevance that the former lacks, and that this is explained by the underlying evaluative facts. Is there some more robust sense in which you go wrong if you violate (W), that does not apply to a violation of (T)? If not, then appealing to (W) will clearly not be the right way to explicate the intuitive thought that, when you take the day off *without* going to the doctor, you have failed to do as you ought in more ways than one.

Of course, some good would result from your satisfying (W), even by way of going to work, whereas, I assume, no substantial good would result from satisfying (T) by way of wearing a tinfoil hat. This might be taken to show that it matters whether you satisfy (W) in a way that

goes beyond the importance of getting to see your doctor. The same cannot be said about the importance of satisfying (T).

But we need to be careful here about the sense in which satisfying (W) “matters” independently of whether you see your doctor. This might just be a different way of saying that *either* seeing the doctor *or* going to work (hence satisfying (W)) would be better than taking the day off without going to the doctor (hence violating (W)). We already knew that, however. The question is whether this evaluative difference has any normative significance, and whether (W) captures this significance. But normatively speaking it’s not so clear that the importance of satisfying (W) outstrips the importance of satisfying your obligation to see your doctor. For, on Kieseewetter’s view, the latter obligation implies that you should take the day off. The fact that, if you do, you will then likely violate (W), should make no difference to you. The supposed importance of satisfying (W) no more implies that you should go to work, given that that’s the only way you’re likely to satisfy it, than the “importance” of satisfying (T) implies that you should don a tinfoil hat.

Perhaps there is a less direct way in which (W)’s normative relevance goes beyond (T)’s. At one point Kieseewetter claims that under certain conditions we may have “second-order reasons to adopt additional measures that ensure [our] conformity” to our first-order obligations.¹⁵ On one way of reading this, it suggests that you may have reason to take indirect steps to bring it about that you satisfy (W), perhaps by ensuring that you do not take the day off, given that you are unlikely to see your doctor—just as, if you expect to drink, you might bring it about that you do not drink and drive by making sure that you do not have access to your car.¹⁶ This, in turn, would mark a difference between (W) and (T), since you have no good second-order reason to bring it about that you satisfy (T) by wearing a tinfoil hat.

But, in fact, this would be a puzzling suggestion in the present context.¹⁷ According to Kieseewetter, you are not permitted to satisfy (W) by going to work, rather than going to the doctor. How, then, can it be that you are permitted to take indirect steps to bring it about that you go to work? Suppose that you make arrangements to ensure that, if you are not likely to go to the doctor, you will somehow be prevented from taking the day off. On Kieseewetter's view, such arrangements will prevent you from doing something you ought to do—namely take the day off. And if, in order to take the day off, you must refrain from making arrangements that will prevent you from doing so, it follows from the transmission principle he defends that you ought to refrain from making such arrangements.

It thus appears that your obligation to make sure that, if you will not see your doctor, then you do not take the day off—much like your obligation to make sure that, if you will not see your doctor, then you wear a tinfoil hat—is basically irrelevant to your thinking about what to do in your situation. Neither (W) nor (T) prescribes any action or choice on your part that is not called for by the simple obligation to see your doctor.¹⁸ You should still take the day off work, regardless of whether or not you will go to the doctor. And, presumably, you should not wear a tinfoil hat, regardless of whether or not you will go to the doctor.

On reflection, then, it seems that the appeal to a wide-scope obligation like (W) is beside the point. It is not really responsive to the intuition that the benefit of going to work rather than sitting at home has some normative significance, given that you're unlikely to go to the doctor in any case. And it therefore does not help us avoid the counterintuitive results of the transmission principle in cases like Broome's.

This leaves Kieseewetter's theoretical arguments against the kind of reasoning that does yield the intuitively right results ('Though you *should* see the doctor, you (probably) won't, even

if you take the day off... so, you should not take the day off"). Intuitions aside, we have to confront the charge that there must be something wrong with such reasoning, since it is inconsistent with the principles of joint satisfiability and reason transmission. I turn, in the next two sections, to a reexamination of the case for these principles.

3. JOINT SATISFIABILITY

Suppose I judge that I ought to ϕ and that I ought to ψ ; and suppose I know that I cannot do both. Kieseewetter claims that, if my judgments concern the *deliberative ought*, I am rationally committed to forming incompatible intentions—that is, to intending to ϕ and intending to ψ , despite knowing that these intentions cannot both be realized. Thus, as he puts it, “agents in such situations would be necessarily irrational just because they believe the truth about what they ought to do.”¹⁹ Given the implausibility of this, Kieseewetter concludes that obligations (in the all-things-considered, deliberation-concluding sense) must be jointly satisfiable.

There is a problem with this argument, however. In the sorts of cases offered as counterexamples to the transmission principle, such as Broome’s doctor appointment case, it’s not accurate to say that a violation of joint satisfiability means the agent would be irrational *just because* she believed the truth about what she ought to do. This is easy to miss, since it is true that where an agent judges that she has multiple (all-things-considered) obligations that are not jointly satisfiable, that agent must be failing in some way to be fully rational. But in the cases that present problems for the transmission principle, this is because some of these obligations apply *in virtue of* the agent’s failure to be fully rational.

To see this, let’s return to Broome’s example. Recall that this is not a case where you will fail to do as you should (viz., visit your doctor) because you will be prevented from doing so. It

is, rather, a case where you cannot bring yourself to intend and act as you judge you should. You are *akratic*. It's as a result of this failure of practical rationality that, according to the actualist interpretation, you ought to do something incompatible with seeing the doctor—namely, go to work. Suppose, then, you believe that, because you won't see your doctor (although you should) you should not take the day off work. This normative belief is not the source or cause of your irrationality, but a response to it. What seemed absurd was the idea that judging correctly what you ought to do could itself prevent you from being fully rational. But that is not what is happening in the present case.

Indeed, even if you were to believe that you ought to go to the doctor and that you ought to go to work—despite knowing you cannot do both—this would not imply that you were rationally required to form incompatible intentions. If you were not weak willed, and could bring yourself to form a stable and effective intention to go to the doctor, it would no longer be *true* that you should go to work. Assuming you revised your beliefs accordingly, the rational requirement to intend to go to work would therefore lapse. Rationality thus does not require that you simultaneously intend to see the doctor and go to work because the rationality of your intending to go to work is conditional on your *failing* to respond rationally to your judgment that you ought to see the doctor.

This shows that it is not necessary that one's obligations be jointly satisfiable in order to avoid the implication that rationality itself may require an incoherent set of intentions. At most, Kieseewetter's argument concerning the deliberative role of *ought*-judgments supports a qualified version of joint satisfiability:

If S ought to ϕ and S ought to ψ , then either S can (ϕ and ψ) or it's the case that S ought to ψ only if S will not ϕ (or vice-versa).

But this qualified joint satisfiability principle is consistent with the verdict that Broome's case is an example of instrumental transmission failure.

4. REASON TRANSMISSION

I have just argued that, in order to understand the deliberative role of *ought*-judgments, we do not need to assume they must conform to the principle of joint satisfiability. But Kieseewetter also argues that both joint satisfiability and the transmission principle are explained, at a deeper level, by a basic structural feature of practical reasons—viz., that “if A has a reason to ϕ and ψ -ing is an incompatible alternative to ϕ -ing, then A has an equally strong reason not to ψ .”

Is this principle of reason transmission true? Clearly there is some way in which an agent may have reasons not to do something, which derive from her reasons in favor of incompatible alternatives. But it's not clear the relation is as straightforward as Kieseewetter's account indicates.

First, a preliminary point. As formulated, reason transmission is ambiguous. It might imply that, for every reason A has to ϕ , she has an additional, corresponding reason of equal strength for her not to ψ . Or it might imply only that, for every reason A has to ϕ of a given strength, A has at least one reason of that strength not to ψ . On the first reading, if Margot has several reasons to travel to England next week, then she has at least as many equally strong reasons *not* to stay home in France. On the second reading, as long as the reasons she has to go to England are of equal strength, she may have just one reason of that same strength not to stay home.

Now, it seems clear that it is the first reading that Kieseletter intends. For in order to explain why *ought* transmits from ends to means on the basis of reason transmission, it must become harder and harder to justify performing a given action, the more reasons of the same strength the agent discovers in favor of an incompatible alternative. In any case, it is surely the more natural interpretation.

This brings us to the first problem with reason transmission. Once we make it explicit that, for every reason an agent has to perform an act that is incompatible with ϕ -ing, she has an additional reason of the same strength not to ϕ , we get some troubling results. For instance, suppose that A has several options open to her, w, x, y, and z. Assume she has the same reason for each of the options, but that she doesn't need to perform more than one—they are, say, each equally good, individually sufficient ways of achieving some end of hers. But now imagine that, while it would be possible for A to do any combination of w, x, and y, it is not possible for her to do z together with any of the other options. Given these assumptions, reason transmission entails that, other things equal, A has more reason not to do z as compared with her other options—and, therefore, that she should not do z. Because doing z is not compatible with doing w, x, or y, whereas the latter three are compatible with one another, reason transmission implies that she has additional reasons against performing z, which do not apply to the options w, x, or y. For instance, z is incompatible with doing w, so she her reason for performing w gives her a reason of equal strength not to do z. But her reason for performing w does not similarly provide reasons against x and y. Thus, although A has exactly the same reason to do z as she has to do w, x, or y, only these last three options are rationally permissible. But this conclusion makes no sense. Given that A only needs to do one of these things, the mutual compatibility of w, x, and y, should be irrelevant. And since A has the same reason to do z as she has to perform w, x, or y,

we have been given no reason to think that, of the four options, she should *not* do z. There is something wrong with reason transmission as formulated.

There is a second problem with reason transmission, one that brings us closer to the central issues we've been discussing. Consider the following case. Imagine a country doctor who has just received word that two separate patients of hers are about to give birth in their homes and need medical assistance. The doctor knows that there is a much higher risk of complications for patient 1 than for patient 2, and thus her reason to attend to patient 1 is stronger than her reason to attend to patient 2.²⁰ Because she cannot assist both women (they live too far apart; there is no time to go back and forth), reason transmission implies that the doctor's reasons *not* to assist patient 2 outweigh her reasons to assist her.

But in fact it's not clear that the assumptions we've made so far are sufficient to establish this conclusion. For suppose that the doctor has no intention of attending to patient 1. She has decided she's too tired to be bothered with another delivery and is heading home to bed. The first thing to note is that it would plainly be disingenuous for the doctor to explain why she did not help patient 2 by citing the fact that there was another patient who was in greater need.²¹ Moreover, given that the doctor is not planning to help patient 1, the fact that she cannot assist both women will not, in this context, help to justify her refusal to deliver patient 2's baby. Her failure to attend to patient 2 is simply unjustified under the circumstances (as is her failure to attend to patient 1).

But this is a problem. Normally, if an agent has a decisive normative reason against ϕ -ing, recognizes that she has this reason not to ϕ and that it is decisive, and is aware of all the relevant facts about her situation, then, if she decides not to ϕ on the basis of that reason, this will constitute a justification for her decision.²² Yet, the doctor's supposed reason against

attending to patient 2—whether we understand that reason as provided by the fact that she has stronger reason to attend to patient 1, or the fact she cannot attend to both women, or some combination of these facts²³—does *not* contribute to the justification of her decision not to do so, even if we suppose she takes it to be decisive and knows all the relevant facts. This should lead us to be skeptical of the claim that a reason which favors one option automatically provides a reason against any incompatible alternative.

What, then, is the relation between the reasons that favor one course of action and the corresponding reasons not to pursue alternatives? The example above indicates that, insofar as an agent's reason to do one thing bears on her decision about whether or not to do something else, this latter decision should not be treated as strictly independent of her decision about whether to do the first thing. Our doctor is, in effect, treating the question of whether to assist patient 2 as separate from the question of whether to assist patient 1—indeed, we imagined her addressing the former question having already settled the latter in the negative. It is this, I suggest, that explains the failure of transmission from her reason to look after patient 1, on the one hand, to a reason not to look after patient 2, on the other.²⁴

How can we formulate this more precisely? One possibility would be to insist that a consideration supporting one option, ϕ , will ground a reason against performing an incompatible alternative, ψ , only insofar as the prospective decision not to ψ is *connected* to an intention to ϕ . In what sense “connected”? I think we can say that the decision not to ψ is relevantly connected to the agent's intention to ϕ if it is susceptible to an (at least partial) teleological explanation in terms of being directed at the end of ϕ -ing: *She refrained from ψ -ing in order to ϕ .* Similarly, an agent regards the *prospect* of a decision not to ψ as connected to the (also possibly prospective)

intention to ϕ insofar as her deliberation presupposes that, were she to decide not to ψ , this would be *for the sake of* doing ϕ .

The intuitive idea here is that the fact that there are good reasons to take some alternative to the course of action one is contemplating is something one should only view as relevant insofar as one is considering actually performing that alternative. If one has (rationally or irrationally) ruled this out—if one expects not to take this alternative—then the considerations in its favor fail to provide corresponding reasons *against* taking the action one is currently contemplating.

If this is right, it leads naturally to a corresponding conclusion about the instrumental transmission of *ought*. You ought to go to the doctor; you have conclusive reason to do so. But your reasons for going to the doctor will not constitute reasons *against* going to work if your decision not to go to work would have no relevant connection to an intention to see your doctor. And this is just what we are inclined to think about the case we've been discussing. Under the circumstances it would hardly be credible to explain your taking the day off as something you do in order to see your doctor. Indeed, it's not clear why—for what purpose—you would be taking the day off. But why should you take the reasons you have for going to the doctor to be relevant to a decision concerning whether to opt for an unconnected (and pointless) day off from work? If we agree that you should not, then the remaining considerations that *do* bear on whether or not to go to work will support going. The conditions are not right for normative transmission.

5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Kieseewetter's objections to actualism are not decisive, since they depend on the principles of joint satisfiability and reason transmission and we have little reason

to accept either of these in the unqualified forms his arguments require. I have also argued that Kieseewetter's attempt to accommodate our intuitions about examples like Broome's by appeal to wide-scope obligations fails to do justice to our sense of what is relevant in these cases.

This is not, however, to defend actualism itself, in its full generality—the view that, as Kieseewetter puts it on 926, “A ought to ϕ if, and only if, ϕ -ing is an option such that what *would* happen if A ϕ -s is (expectably) better than what *would* happen if A does not ϕ .” There are serious problems with actualism, understood in that way, as a general deontic thesis.²⁵ But my purpose was not to argue for actualism. It was to make good on the claim that cases like Broome's provide genuine counterexamples to the transmission principle. Under certain conditions—for instance, where an agent is suffering *akrasia* or related forms of irrationality—the transmission of (all-things-considered) obligation from ends to means is blocked. Whether, in light of this, we should accept actualism is a further question.

* I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for *Ethics* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

¹ Benjamin Kiesewetter, "Instrumental Normativity: In Defense of the Transmission Principle," *Ethics* 125 (2015): 921-946. The transmission principle is first formulated on 922.

² I use "ought" and "should" interchangeably throughout.

³ John Broome, *Rationality through Reasoning*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 126. Kiesewetter discusses this case on 938-939. An important feature of Broome's example is that it is assumed that the expected failure to go to the doctor is one you are or would be responsible for—it is not that you will be prevented from going to the doctor by something outside of your control. Kiesewetter also addresses putative counterexamples to the transmission principle in which the agent is not responsible for acting as she should (sec. III., B. and C). I agree with Kiesewetter that these cases do not pose a serious problem for the transmission principle. Accordingly, I will focus on Broome's example. Another example of this type is Jackson and Pargetter's well-known case of Professor Procrastinate. See Frank Jackson and Robert Pargetter, "Oughts, Options, and Actualism," *Philosophical Review* 96 (1986): 233-255; Frank Jackson, "Procrastinate Revisited," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 95 (2014): 634-647; Kiesewetter "Instrumental Normativity," 926.

⁴ Actualists are generally committed to more than this. Thus, Kiesewetter, following Jackson and Pargetter, defines actualism as the view that "A ought to ϕ if, and only if, ϕ -ing

is an option such that what *would* happen if A ϕ -s is (expectably) better than what *would* happen if A does not ϕ ,” (ibid., 926). One need not accept all of this in order to accept what I will call the “actualist interpretation” of the putative counterexamples. For example, one need not (and I do not) hold that the relevant contrast, which helps to determine whether A ought to ϕ , is limited to what A *would* do if A does *not* ϕ . This point, however, does not affect the cogency of Kieseewetter’s objections.

⁵ He also notes that arguments might be made against actualism on the basis of two further principles of deontic logic, “Distribution,” and “Agglomeration” (ibid., 930), but does not pursue these, as appeal to these principles may be thought to beg the question.

⁶ Ibid., 930.

⁷ Ibid., 931.

⁸ Ibid. 931.

⁹ Ibid., 945.

¹⁰ Ibid., 945.

¹¹ Ibid., 945-946.

¹² For ease of exposition, I follow Kieseewetter in departing somewhat from ordinary English and using “obligation” as the nominalization of “ought.”

¹³ Ibid., 939; see also 934-937.

¹⁴ Ibid., 934.

¹⁵ Ibid., 937.

¹⁶ Ibid., 937.

¹⁷ To be fair, Kieseewetter raises the possibility of indirect, or second-order reasons in the course of addressing a somewhat different objection. He does not explicitly say that you might have reason to indirectly bring it about that you satisfy a wide-scope obligation in some way other than by satisfying your primary, narrow-scope obligations.

¹⁸ It is true that, if your situation were different, and it were not the case that you should see your doctor today, (W) might still be true, whereas (T) would probably not be. This is because we can imagine relatively minor changes to your situation that would make going to work the best thing for you to do. But this seems to me irrelevant to the question of whether (W) is an adequate expression of what is normatively significant in your actual situation. All that it shows is that, in the nearby possible worlds in which going to work is the best option available, (W) will be true for a different reason—namely, for the reason that, in those worlds, you ought to go to work, not the doctor. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

¹⁹ Ibid., 931.

²⁰ Assume there are no other relevant factors besides the patients' need for medical assistance.

²¹ Compare Kieseewetter on how you might explain not going to a Portishead concert (ibid., 945).

²² Though it may not fully justify it if, in addition, the agent bases her decision to ϕ on further, *bad* reasons. This does not affect my point, however, since I take it that in the example in the text, the fact that patient 1 is in greater need, and she cannot help both

patient 1 and patient 2, does not lend *any* justificatory weight to the doctor's decision not to help patient 2 (although it would have had the doctor actually gone to help patient 1).

²³ See *ibid.*, 945, n. 51

²⁴ That this is on the right track is, I think, confirmed by returning to my first, schematic counterexample to reason transmission. Where A faces multiple options, w, x, y, and z, which are all equally good for her purposes, it seems implausible that her reasons for doing each of w, x, and y should add up to a decisive case against doing z. But this, too, is explained by the fact that, if A were to reach this conclusion, she would be treating certain questions as independent, which should be considered together. The question of whether to do x or z is not, given the deliberative context, separate from the question of whether to do y or z (or, for that matter, whether to do x or y, or w).

²⁵ See, for instance, Jacob Ross, "Actualism, Possibilism, and Beyond," in Mark Timmons, ed., *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press): pp. 74-96; Fabrizio Cariani, "Consequence and Contrast in Deontic Semantics," *Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).