





circle. A possibilist would insist that a square circle does not provide a counterexample to the theory that nothing can be imagined to be circular.

It is helpful before proceeding further to be explicit about what a hypothetical counterexample actually is. For this paper's purposes, a hypothetical counterexample takes the following form, the *Counterexample Schema*:

1. If theory  $T$  is true, then if  $C$  were to obtain, then  $P$  would obtain.<sup>7</sup>
2. But it is false that if  $C$  were to obtain, then  $P$  would obtain.
3. Therefore,  $T$  is false.

Here,  $C$  is some condition or situation, such as a murderer at the door or a malfunctioning tele-transporter. The point of a hypothetical counterexample, then, is to charge a theory with making a falsified prediction; some theory predicts one outcome or conclusion, but (perhaps intuitively) a contrary outcome or conclusion is what would actually obtain. And the pertinent question for this paper is whether counterexamples work when the value of  $C$  is something metaphysically impossible.

So far, of course, these are rather abstract remarks with little in the way of real-life philosophical bite. It may be helpful to remain at this level of abstraction for now in order to establish a possibilism. After the arguments for a possibilism are presented, this paper will explore further implications for actual philosophical debates, which will help to put flesh on this skeleton of a position. It turns out that these implications are, in some cases, quite revisionary indeed.

## II. FOR AND AGAINST THE POSSIBILITY CONDITION

Possibilists impose the Possibility Condition, according to which hypothetical counterexamples must be possible in order to be probative. Apossibilists do not impose this condition. As stated earlier,

---

<sup>7</sup> Of course, the conditional is subjunctive because the counterexample is hypothetical, not actual.

most philosophers seem to gravitate toward possibilism without putting much thought into the question. After all, why bother with impossible counterexamples when the possible ones seem to be working just fine? In general, one might expect the abandonment of the Possibility Condition to coincide with dialectical gains for philosophical skeptics and particularists of various stripes, since now general theories will be open to many more counterexamples.<sup>8</sup> So this is what is at stake: possibilism will prove amenable to theory-builders, and apossibilism will prove amenable to theory-breakers. These expectations will not be taken as reasons in their own right to prefer possibilism or apossibilism, since that would require an independent defense of one type of approach. But the expectations will be borne out in the final section of this paper.

How, then, would one adjudicate this debate? A straightforward approach would be to hold that the most basic position makes no claim at all about whether the Possibility Condition is required, and argue that anyone who wishes to take any particular position here bears the burden of proof. Someone taking this approach could cheerfully offer a host of impossible counterexamples, and then sit back and wait for the possibilist to argue against those counterexamples, whether she chooses to stake her position on their impossibility. After all, few philosophers who offer counterexamples in general take the time to justify the method in general, and so apossibilists might well continue with this tradition: I'm going to offer a counterexample, and not explain why you should accept counterexamples, since no one else tries to explain this either. Then the possibilist can attempt to offer specific objections, some of which may be based upon the impossibility of the situation identified in the hypothetical counterexample.

This paper will proceed by attempting to answer arguments against impossible counterexamples, and then offering some positive remarks about why one cannot oppose impossible counterexamples without opposing the method of counterexample as a whole. There

---

<sup>8</sup> For example, generalists in ethics say that ethics comprises moral principles; particularists deny this. Compare J. Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004.

may be serious problems with the method of counterexample in general, but this paper is not

Apparently everyone is already committed to the  $\rightarrow$ -elimination theorem, and therefore everyone should be committed to any substitution-instance of it. One might of course deny that a logic containing that theorem is sound if it is intended to apply to models in which  $\rightarrow$  and  $\neg$  are uncoinstantiable. Perhaps there is an argument for that conclusion, but it is so far unknown. So at first glance, even widely accepted languages of logic provide a way to evaluate some subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents.

There are also intuitive reasons to think one can evaluate subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents. Specifically, some of these conditionals can seem non-trivially true or false. After all, it might just seem true that if there were a square circle, there would be a shape, or if  $2+2$  were to equal 5, then accurate calculators would report that  $2+2=5$ . The onus is on the possibilist to explain why, specifically, one should not simply evaluate these as *true*, and non-trivially so. What is an accurate calculator, other than one that correctly reports mathematical equalities?

What is more, real-world philosophers already accept as non-trivially true some subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents. For example, Anselmian theists believe that God is a

So philosophers commonly think that it is possible to evaluate subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents, and there is so far no reason to disagree with them.

Now, the aforementioned cases are apparently examples wherein the antecedent in question is taken to be





philosophers think it is known that zombies are impossible) that utility monsters were impossible. It is unlikely that this would completely save utilitarianism from the utility monster objection; the objector would still insist that the utilitarian was responding to utility monsters the wrong way. Consider a simpler analogue: Suppose a normative ethical theory had it that anyone who saw a square circle was justified in torturing a child in order to derive a modicum of pleasure. It is clear that this theory is false, not simply unevaluable or trivially true or even true. The perception of a square circle provides a counterexample, since even i

### III. A FEW IMPLICATIONS

There are several reasons to allow impossible counterexamples in philosophical debate, or at least, to audition them instead of rejecting them out of hand. Suppose philosophers were to allow impossible counterexamples. Would the field of philosophy change significantly?

The

connection between states of affairs and obligations is broken? Another option for the generalist would be to bite the bullet and acknowledge that it really would be obligatory for a deontology or virtue monster (say) to torture an innocent child. But if one allows the biting of bullets this big, it is unclear how to proceed with normative ethical debate in general. After all, the deontologist is likely to criticize the consequentialist for biting similar bullets, as in the Southern sheriff case. If one can just accept such implications willy-nilly, one has almost departed from standard normative ethical debate completely.

These speculations are necessarily brief, given the space allowed here. However, if there are general lessons, one seems to be that some subfields of philosophy would be quite a bit different with impossible counterexamples, and others would remain mostly the same. Another lesson is that perhaps only the (narrowly) logically possible (but metaphysically impossible) impossible counterexamples should be considered. Even if so, philosophers should seriously consider impossible counterexamples when formulating or objecting to a theory. The last lesson to draw is that these counterexamples seem to make more of a difference for theories that assert that various conditions produce various *reasons*; compare the case of justified beliefs in square circles, or moral justification in the case of generalism and deontology monsters. Indeed, this observation is strengthened by the realization that once again, the point of utility monster style objections is not to criticize theories' implications about the actual world, but instead to criticize the role of various reasons, or of various conditions as generating various reasons. While descriptive philosophy may be able to downplay impossible counterexamples, normative philosophy such as epistemology a