EVERYONE'S CONFORMING TO A RULE

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It has been said that in order for a rule to be a moral rule or a principle of rational action it must be possible consistently to will it as a universal law. And it can seem that it is possible consistently to will a rule to be a universal law of action only if universal conformity to it is viewed as a possibility and indeed a possibility that would be possessed of consistently willable consequences. One problem with being clear about such ideas concerning possible moral and rational principles is that there are a number of distinct ways in which universal conformity to a rule, or everyone's acting according to it, can be understood, and universal conformity in one sense to a rule may be possible while in another sense or even in all other senses universal conformity to it would be impossible. And of course consequences of universal conformities in different senses to a rule can differ. The project of the present paper is, with one restriction, to distinguish sorts of universal conformity to rules from one another. The restriction is that we will attend only to ways in which universal conformity to a rule at a time can be possible or impossible. Problems specific to universal conformity to rules through intervals of time are not taken up. For example, it seems evident that, given certain natural assumptions, universal conformity to the rule,

\begin{equation}
(R1) \quad \text{When in need, borrow without intending to repay.}
\end{equation}

could not be indefinitely sustained, for if persons remained true to their intentions, eventually there would be no lenders and so no possibility of borrowing.\(^1\) Spelling out such natural assumptions, and making precise the sense in which universal conformity to rules like R1 could not be sustained, are examples of tasks \textit{not} taken up here.

In what follows, several ways in which universal conformity to rules can be possible or impossible are distinguished. Then, in Section Two, these ways are related to a number of consequentialist rules, including one of quite re-
cent manufacture, and brief remarks are made on how very different can be
the consequences of different sorts of universal conformities to a given rule.

1. WAYS IN WHICH EVERYONE'S CONFORMING TO A RULE
   CAN BE POSSIBLE

'Distributively' Possible Universal Conformity

It is always possible for each person to conform to the rule,

\[(R2)\] Do the best you can do.

This rule requires that one do the thing, among those things one can do on a
given occasion, that would be best. That is always something a person can do.
Conformity to R2 is always for everyone 'distributively' possible. In contrast,
it should be obvious that it is not always possible to conform to the rule,

\[(R3)\] Keep promises you have made.

Whether or not a person can always conform to R3 will depend on what
promises he has made, and on circumstances when they fall due. Conformity
to R3 is not always 'distributively' possible for everyone.

'Collectively' Possible Universal Conformity

Even when conformity to a rule is 'distributively,' or for everyone 'considered
singly,' possible, it can be impossible for everyone (i.e., for all persons)
'collectively,' or 'taken together.' Indeed there are at least two senses in
which everyone's (i.e., all persons') doing what is required by a rule can be
'collectively' impossible — two distinct and independent senses. Complexity
here derives from the fact that what is required of a person by a rule in cer-
tain circumstances can depend on what others are doing in these circum-
stances, and would do were he to do this or that. As a consequence, what is
required of a person by a rule in a case can differ from what would be re-
quired of him were all persons in this case doing their duties under the rule.
A pattern of action in which everyone in a case does what, in the circum-
stances of the case, is required of him by a rule can differ from patterns in
which persons in the case so act and are so disposed that given their actions