Moral Demandingness of Consequentialism

Optimality, Blameworthiness and the Scalarnesss of Value

All plausible moral theories impose some moral demands to people. However, consequentialism—maximizing act-consequentialism in particular—is often singled out as excessively demanding. The idea behind the demandingness objection is roughly that maximizing act-consequentialism demands so much from moral agents to the point where no acceptable moral theory can reasonably demand. In other words, maximizing act-consequentialism is too costly. The aim of this paper is threefold. First, this paper seeks to understand why maximizing act-consequentialism is particularly vulnerable to the demandingness objection. Second, this paper aims to clarify the demandingness objection and show how it can be independent of other objections against maximizing act-consequentialism. Third, this paper suggests that a plausible way to meet the demandingness objection is to understand morality as an ideal rather than demand.

1. Why maximizing act-consequentialism is particularly vulnerable?

In the literature, it is widely agreed that consequentialism/utilitarianism faces a unique problem of over-demandingness. To understand the debate, three questions must be answered. Why is consequentialism distinctively demanding? What does consequentialism actually demand from us? And what makes such demands objectionable?

Roughly speaking, consequentialism is the view that morality is only about producing the right kinds of overall consequences. While this understanding of consequentialism does not entail any demanding duties, the targeted theory—maximizing act-consequentialism—specifies this view in two further ways. First, it is concerned with assessing the moral rightness of acts, instead of evaluating a set of rules that would bring about the best consequences. Second, it requires us to always pursue the alternatives that would bring about the best consequence, as opposed to a good enough improvement. Moreover, all plausible version of consequentialism is committed to impartiality—the same moral standard is applied to everyone, and each person’s interest counts equally. The reason why maximizing act-consequentialism is often being criticized as excessively demanding is because a moral agent is always obliged to act in

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a way that will bring about the highest value; all other acts are morally wrong, and hence ought to be condemned. To act morally under the consequentialist framework requires a huge sacrifice on the compliant agents’ part—they are always expected to cast aside their personal value and interest in order to bring about the optimal outcomes.

The most prominent form of maximizing act-consequentialism is act-utilitarianism, which is committed to welfarism and aggregation. By welfarism, it means that good consequences consist in the promotion of wellbeing. The precise conception of wellbeing varies. The desire satisfaction theories and the hedonistic conception of wellbeing as pleasure and pain are the most popular versions. Nonetheless, the precise conception is not important for our purpose, since any plausible conception of wellbeing is sufficient to engender the demandingness problem. The aggregative component maintains that individuals’ wellbeing can be summed up as an overall utility with which we can compare different acts. If we put everything together, it means that we morally ought to promote the greatest sum of wellbeing.

What do act-utilitarianism and its closely related consequentialist cousins demand from us? Given the current dire state of global poverty, we—relatively well off individuals—morally ought to spend our time, money, and energy to increase the overall sum of wellbeing by reducing the suffering of the least well-off.² For most of us—ordinary individuals—it means that we morally ought to donate the largest possible amount of our income regularly to the most effective aid agencies in the world.³ Even seemingly harmless acts such as buying unnecessary clothes or enjoying a very

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² This is due to the law of diminishing marginal returns. With the same amount of time, money, and energy, benefiting the least well-off will result in the greatest sum of wellbeing. There are many strong evidences showing that with the same amount of money, the life of the least well-off can be improved by a much greater extend when comparing to using them to relatively well-off individuals. See: MacAskill, W. (2016). Doing Good better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference. New York: Penguin Random House.

³ By “ordinary individual”, it refers to people who 1) do not have sufficient political influence to shape structural reform, 2) the expertise and resources to innovate a better intervention program, or 3) any other better means to promote the greatest sum of wellbeing. Obviously, for a considerable amount of people, focusing on donation may not be the optimal strategy. However, the maximizing requirement will still be very demanding, regardless of the mode of fulfilling the requirement. Moreover, while it is true that if everyone donates an enormous amount of money to the “top charities”, the result may be far from optimal, a good consequentialist will also consider the actual and likely behavior of others. A good consequentialist is correct in assuming that it is highly improbably that a tremendous amount of people will suddenly donate most of their income. Moreover, other people’s actual behavior has already been built into the very conception of effectiveness. For instance, supporting a charity that is sufficiently funded will not be effective if taken into account marginal utility per dollar. Lastly, even when global poverty in the sense of absolute deprivation has been solved, there will still have other important moral concerns, and the maximizing requirement will still give rise to highly demanding duties.
expensive meal can be morally impermissible. This means that most, if not all, of us are acting immorally. There is little room for our personal interest. Such demands of consequentialism impose a tremendous cost to the complying agents.

What makes maximizing act-consequentialism uniquely demanding is the presumption of optimality—the idea that only the best is good enough. Some people find this presumption objectionable because it leaves no room for supererogatory acts—acts that go beyond the call of duty. Supererogatory is a familiar category in our daily moral discourse. For instance, most people do think that acts of charity are morally admirable, but not morally required. However, the coherence of supererogation is often questioned by philosophers. Hence, the mere fact that a theory fails to preserve this category seems not a strong objection to the theory.

The implausibility of the presumption of optimality lies in its implication on people’s blameworthiness. It is commonly thought that the moral wrongness of an act and the agent’s moral blameworthiness comes hand in hand. If someone is acting immorally, that person is morally blameworthy. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that according to the utilitarian calculation, Mary is morally required to donate 70% of her income every month to Against Malaria Foundation. Mary is deeply committed to improving the life of the least well-off and donates 60% of her income regularly, but spends the other 10% on “luxuries” such as upgrading her sports equipment and musical instruments. Although Mary is behaving far much better than most people, according to maximizing act-utilitarianism, she is still doing something morally blameworthy. As Brian McElwee succinctly puts it, maximizing act-utilitarianism “condemns as morally wrong behaviour which seems a paradigm of morally admirable behavior”.

Nonetheless, the connection between the morally wrongness of an act and the agent’s moral blameworthiness is not uncontroversial. In Reason and Person, Derek Parfit introduces the notion of blameless wrongdoing, arguing that there are cases where

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4 One may argue that given human nature, even in the best possible scenario, perhaps some incentives are required in order for an individual to deliver optimal utility. That being said, most “luxuries” that we are enjoying are hardly justified.
people are not blameworthy for knowingly act immorally. This is because the agent acted on a *correct motive*—if the agent acts on a different motive, things will become worst on the whole. Parfit has given several examples of blameless wrongdoing. Consider Parfit’s most relevant example:

“Clare can save either her child, or several strangers. Because she loves her child, she saves him, and the strangers all die.”

Her love for her child is among the best positive motives because 1) she would be a worse mother without her parenting love, and this will lead to a worse outcome, and 2) she could not possibly foresee beforehand that she would be in such a dilemma. Hence, although she fails to bring about an optimal consequence, she was not blameworthy for maintaining her love towards her child.

However, even if moral wrongness is not necessarily connected with moral blameworthiness, the category of blameless wrongdoing is not helpful in mitigating the demandingness of maximizing act-consequentialism. Let us return to the example of Mary, who donates a substantial amount of money to charities, but not the maximal amount she can give. Can Mary justify not changing her motive? Unlike Clare’s case, Mary could not say that she should not alter her motive on the grounds that she cannot possibly foresee that there is extreme poverty—it is a widely known fact. In other words, Mary could have foreseen that if she does not alter her motive, many more people will suffer more under extreme poverty. Also, she could have taken steps to change her motives. Failing to do so, she should be blamed for acting on her present set of motives, as they never even come close to being the best possible set.

To maintain that her action is an instance of blameless wrongdoing, Mary must claim that she already has the best possible motives. In doing so, it seems that Mary has to claim that it would be psychologically impossible for her to have better motives. However, it is unclear why donating a very substantial amount of money is impossible. It seems to be just an instance of wishful thinking. While we may need empirical findings to determine the limit of human psychology, and no moral theory should demand what is impossible, we should consider the following question: should morality

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9 Ibid. pp. 33.
10 Ibid. pp. 33.
demand all that is psychologically possible? If maximizing act-consequentialism pushes us to the very limit of human psychology, blaming us for every act that falls short of optimality, it will still be very demanding.

One may be tempting to deny the said demand, suggesting that maximizing act-consequentialism, properly understood, does not in fact imply the said demand. Frank Jackson emphasizes the importance of being prudent about uncertainty in our normative decision-making. He observes that our everyday reality is full of uncertainty—most of the time, we are not certain that the decision that we made can bring about the maximal utility. Often, we have to play safe and be satisfied with a good enough option when doing so can guarantee a satisfactory consequence, and choosing other options may generate unsatisfactory consequence.

Following such line of thought, one may claim that it is unclear whether one’s donation to the poor can result in any impact at all, or even create negative impact, while spending time on other things, such as having a quality time with one’s children, is very likely to bring about a satisfactory consequence. While this may be convincing in a distance past, it ceases to have any plausibility in today’s world. Nowadays, there are effective and evidence-based charitable interventions, with ample strong evidence suggesting that with the same amount of money, we can improve the life of the least well-off by a much greater extend comparing to using the same money for ourselves and the people around us. Jackson’s line of reasoning is not helpful in mitigating maximizing act-consequentialism’s demandingness.

2. Moral Intuition and the Methodology of Ethics

The demandingness objection relies on two assumptions. First, most people held a firm judgment that said demand is excessive. Second, this judgment is a considered moral judgment—a judgment any plausible moral theory should respect. And maximizing act-
consequentialism is problematic as it fails to cohere with our considered moral judgment.

To be fair, the maximizing act-consequentialists can bite the bullet despite the highly unattractive result the theory yields. A notable example is Shelly Kagan. The first step of his strategy is to point out that every plausible moral theory, consequentialism or not, accepts that valuable consequences provide some reason for action.17 Using “the reason to promote the good” as a starting point, his second step is to argue against all approaches that suggest we are justified to depart from such starting point in some cases.18 He seeks to undermine the reliability of the intuition that morality should not be very demanding, and suggest that such intuition is rested upon an unstable foundation; intuitions that are not accompanied by sound arguments should be rejected outright.19 As Tim Mulgan observes, utilitarians who deny the demandingness objection often claim that “there is no rationale for departures from the consequentialist starting point meets a reasonable standard of proof.”20

However, as Mulgan points out, Kagan has not, in the first place, provided a sustained defense on the view that valuable consequences provide some reason for action.21 Mulgan challenges the thought that consequentialist can justify such positive element of their theory while precluding any reference to the intuitive plausibility of the consequentialist starting point.22

A notable attempt to preclude all moral intuition in justifying utilitarianism is by Henry Sidgwick, who suggests that his version of utilitarianism is derived from self-evident moral axioms.23 However, the consensus in the literature is, even granted that Sidgwick’s axioms are self-evident, they do not deductively establish his principle of utility.24 Opponents of the demandingness objection still owe us an account on why moral intuition can never be admissible evidence in moral methodology.

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18 Ibid. pp. 47-60.
19 Ibid. pp. 11-15.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid. pp. 30.
3. Clarifying the demandingness objection

Act-utilitarianism and consequentialism in general often come under fire because of certain features. Some of these features contribute to the demandingness of the theory. However, it is one thing to say that the reason behind the over-demandingness of maximizing act-consequentialism has to do with some of its features, which are objectionable for some other reasons. It is another thing to say that these demands are in themselves objectionable. To have a better grasp of the targeted objection, it is important to clarify the objection by distinguishing it from other closely related objections. 25

One feature of consequentialism that some philosophers find problematic is its insensitivity towards the distinction between doing and allowing harm. 26 As Bernard Williams observes, “Consequentialism is basically indifferent to whether a state of affairs consists in what I do, or is produced by what I do. All that consequentialism is interested in is the idea of these doings being consequences of what I do, and that is an idea broad enough to include [many sorts of] relations.” 27 For consequentialist, it does not matter whether a given death is a consequence of my act of murder, or a consequence of my refusal to lie to the murderer who is searching for the victim.

John Rawls takes issue with utilitarian on a metaphysical level. 28 He observes that the aggregative principle of utilitarianism follows from a particular idea of moral equality—everyone counts for one and no one counts for more than one. To decide between competing preferences of different individuals, the utilitarian solution is to aggregate all the individual preferences. In doing so, however, Rawls claims that utilitarianism relies on an implausible notion of impartial spectator, which conflates “all persons into one through imaginative acts of the impartial sympathetic spectators”, improperly ignoring the distinctness of person. 29

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25 This paper only outlines these objections for the purpose of distinguishing them from the demandingness objection, but not going into too much detail of these challenges. In any case, they are well discussed in the literature. And there are promising ways for consequentialism to meet these objections.
29 Ibid. However, utilitarians can easily meet this objection by saying that there are other ways to derive utilitarianism without relying on a notion of impartial spectator. See, for instance: Harsanyi, J. (1977) ‘Morality and the theory of rational behavior.’ Social Research 44: pp. 623-56.
Williams finds implausible the utilitarian conception of self from a different perspective, pointing out that utilitarians must always be prepared to abandon their own personal projects and commitments, including their ground projects—projects they “take seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about”. Williams claims that these ground projects are central to any plausible conception of the self, conferring the agents their personal identity overtime. Thus, Williams suggests that utilitarian conception of self is self-defeating.

All the above features of maximizing consequentialism and utilitarianism are, in one way or another, related to its costly demand. However, these objections are distinct from the demandingness objection. First, they targeted at the utilitarian conception of self and the disrespect for certain moral distinction, rather than the cost of the demand. Second, these features are not necessarily connected to excessive demands. For instance, any theory, whether demanding or not, violates agential integrity if it does not respect the agent’s ground projects. On the other hand, a theory can be very demanding without violating anyone’s integrity. Furthermore, there are other forms of consequentialism, which are also indifferent to doing and allowing harm, but are not very demanding. Examples are satisfying act-consequentialism and rule-utilitarianism. Moreover, one can argue for maximizing act-consequentialism without presupposing a metaphysically implausible notion of impartial spectator. Lastly, one can still complain that maximizing act-consequentialism is excessively demanding even when a consequentialist is able to provide a good defense on all the aforementioned objections.

4. Is there a Stand-alone Demandingness Objection?

The view that the demandingness objection can serve as a stand-alone objection against maximizing act-consequentialism has recently come under fire. David Sobel argues that the demandingness objection is question-begging. Consider Sobel’s example: “Joe has two healthy kidneys, and can live a decent life with only one kidney. But Sally needs

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31 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
one of Joe’s kidneys to live.” Maximizing act-consequentialism requires Joe to give Sally his kidney. The demandingness objection states that in requiring Joe to sacrifice his kidney, the theory is objectionable because of the size of the costs. However, if we look at things from Sally perspective, a theory that does not require Joe to transfer his kidney to her is too costly for her. The question here is: can the demandingness objection justify the asymmetry between the costs to the agent and the costs to the patient.\textsuperscript{38}

If we are only counting the size of the cost, a theory that is not too demanding to Joe will be too demanding to Sally. In order to justify an asymmetry, the theory has to give special weight to the costs that are required to the agent, and downplay the costs that are permitted to befall on patients. In other words, the objection has to presuppose a requiring/permitting distinction—there is a significant moral difference between the costs a moral theory requires the agent to bear and the costs a moral theory permits to befall on patients. However, such distinction, which is analogous to the doing/allowing distinction, is in itself an anti-consequentialist presupposition.\textsuperscript{39} After all, consequentialism is only concerned with promoting the right overall consequence; it is indifferent to whether it is Joe who bears the costs or Sally who bears them. Hence, Sobel argues that this presupposition renders the demandingness objection impotent.

The argument can be reconstructed as following:

1. Maximizing act-consequentialism is excessively demanding only if the requiring/permitting distinction is true.
2. The requiring/permitting distinction is true only if maximizing act-consequentialism is false.
3. Therefore: Maximizing act-consequentialism is excessively demanding only if the theory is false.\textsuperscript{40}

The third premise is supposed to establish the conclusion that maximizing act-consequentialism is false. Instead, it assumes that the theory is false. Hence, the objection is question-begging. What the objection truly rejects is not, according to Sobel, the size of the costs; rather, the objection presupposes “the true shape of morality”, and rejects consequentialism on the grounds that the theory fails to respect

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{40} Reconstructed from Ibid.
it. As Sobel puts it, the demandingness objection presupposes “prior and independent breaks with consequentialism”.

The challenge that Sobel poses to the supporters of demandingness objection, then, is to provide a rationale for the asymmetry between the costs to agent and the costs to patient without begging the question. In other words, the objection should be built on the idea that the costs to agent alone can preclude the moral requirement for the agent to always bring about optimal consequences.

5. Costs to the Agents and Blameworthiness

A plausible way to single out the moral demands on the agent is to first focus on the fact that the costs to the agent are self-imposed, while costs to patients are not. Then, an account should be given on why self-imposed costs are distinctive when it comes to determining moral demands to agents. Such an account, as McElwee suggests, should be based on “appropriate responses in our reactive attitudes—of blame and guilt—to the level of altruism and self-sacrifice an agent displays”.

It is important to note that our practices of making moral judgments, such as praising and blaming people, have an evolutionary history. They are developed in such a way that we readily respond to cases of harming and non-cooperation with the sentiments of blame. However, we are also creatures with a certain motivational profile—we are by and large self-interested, with only limited altruism. Moreover, much of our altruistic motivation is targeted only to those who are nearest and dearest to us. Hence, we judge people who take up a self-sacrificing life such as donating 20% of their income to effective charities as morally admirable, even if it is suboptimal. Blaming people, who voluntarily make such a choice, seems pointless and inappropriate, as such an account of moral demands stretches too far from typical human motivations.

Recalled that Sobel’s challenge to the demandingness objection is that why the costs to agent and the costs to patients are treated asymmetrically. The answer is that agents are the ones who comply with moral demands. Patients qua patients are not

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41 Ibid. pp. 7.
42 Ibid.
46 Ibid. pp. 15.
subjected to moral appraisal. And agents are the one who takes up the costs voluntarily. Given that we are self-interested creature with limited altruism, any moral theory should avoid going to far in imposing blame upon those who make significant sacrifices to benefit others but fall short of the maximizing requirement. This is not to challenge the consequentialist understanding of which set of acts are morally better or worst. Rather, the suggestion is that there is a reason to separate such ranking with our appraisal of blameworthiness.

6. Scalar Act-Consequentialism

The aim of this final session is modest: to show that scalar act-consequentialism is a promising way to meet the demandingness objection, rather than the best among all possible ways.

Maximizing act-consequentialism is objectionable because of its demand. Scalar act-consequentialism’s solution is simple: it suggests that consequentialist morality, in its formulation, does not issue any demand at all; it only provides reasons for action.\(^48\) If act-consequentialism does not have any demand to begin with, it cannot possibly be too demanding. Scalar act-consequentialism, as suggested by its name, removes the maximizing feature, which is an important part of maximizing act-consequentialism’s criteria of rightness and wrongness. The theory does not concern with an absolute threshold of right and wrong; rather, it only concerns with what is morally better or worse.

But what is the rationale to hold a scalar version of consequentialism in the first place? The justification should not be just about avoiding the demandingness problem; otherwise, it would be ad hoc. Any argument for scalar consequentialism should start by providing an argument on why good or bad is a scalar concept, rather than an all-or-nothing affair.

Scalar act-consequentialism maintains that the threshold of rightness and wrongness set by all-or-nothing theory of rightness/wrongness is arbitrary—in many cases no more than a convention. For instance, is there a reason to maintain that donating 70% to charities is right, and anywhere below is wrong? Recall the example of Mary, who donates 60% of her income to charities. A maximizing act-consequentialist may argue that after doing all the calculation, 70% is the only correct option as it

maximizes total wellbeing. However, the difference between donating 60% and 70%, in a certain physical sense, is the same as the difference between donating 60% and 50%.\(^{49}\) Other things being equal, a maximizing act-consequentialist should not maintain that there are real significant moral differences between donating 60% and 70%, and 50% and 60%.\(^{50}\)

Suppose that Mary—who is your friend—is pondering whether she should increase her donation by 10%, and suppose another friend of yours Tom—who makes the same income and donates 50% of his income regularly—is considering the same question, a maximizing act-consequentialist will tell you to spend the exact time and energy to persuade them to pursue the higher value alternative, all other things being equal.\(^{51}\) Whether the extra $10,000 is from Mary or Tom does not make a difference from your point of view as a maximizing act-consequentialist. Hence, maximizing act-consequentialists should, by their own reasoning, recognize that thresholds of rightness and wrongness are not fundamental to the theory.

It is true that we often ascribe significance in the difference between the best and the next best option apart from the difference itself. It is often psychologically tempting to draw different lines of right and wrong. It may even be said to be utility maximizing for people to do so. However, they are not at the heart of moral importance, at least from a proper consequentialist point of view. Rather, as Norcross puts it, “actions should be evaluated purely in terms that admit of degrees.”\(^{52}\) Good and bad are scalar concepts.

If morality is all about better or worst, what it tells us is that one state of affair is better than the other one, but it does not require us to pursue the better option. While this removes the worry of consequentialism to be too demanding, people may find scalar act-consequentialism objectionable on the grounds that it is not sufficiently demanding. The central function of morality, after all, is to guide action. How can a theory that does not issue any demand fulfill this function?

Although scalar act-consequentialism does not have a distinct account of wrongness, the notion of wrongness can be construed as being worse than other

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\(^{49}\) Ibid.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

available alternatives.\textsuperscript{53} And even though scalar act-consequentialism does not tell us what we ought to do, it tells us what we have reason to do.\textsuperscript{54} The fact that a theory provides us with a reason to or not to act in a certain way is sufficient to guide our actions. There is a huge debate in the literature on whether moral beliefs are intrinsically motivating. However, this is irrelevant in this context, because if the answer to the above question is yes, then one of course have a motivating reason to want to promote the good and avoid producing worse state of affairs. But even if the answer is no, as long as one cares about avoiding “wrongdoing”, one cannot consistently believe an act is wrong and want to avoid doing so, but do the act without feeling guilty (except in the case of blameless wrongdoing).\textsuperscript{55}

To recap, in so far we accept that our intuition that morality should not always completely take up our live is a considered moral judgment, there is a demandingness objection to maximizing act-consequentialism. The objection cannot be met without substantial revisal of the theory. This paper suggests that scalar act-consequentialism is a plausible solution.

This paper would like to end with the suggestion that the concept of rightness should be conceived as an ideal we aspire. Consider the following analogy:

“… the approach taken by many Christians, who view Christ as a moral exemplar. A common articulation of this view is the question ‘What would Jesus do?’… Inasmuch as the extant accounts of Christ’s life provide a basis for answering this question, the answer is clearly supposed to function as an ideal towards which we are supposed to aspire, and not as a demand that must be met in order to avoid wrongdoing. The closer we come to emulating the life or the actions of Christ, the better our lives or our actions are.”\textsuperscript{56}

Similarly, the consequentialist criteria of rightness should be construed as an ideal we aspire. The ideal right actions are that which creates the optimal good. This captures the intuitive idea that the more good we do, the better it is, but it is not morally wrong for us not to bring about the optimal consequence.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. pp. 49.
References:


