



DISCUSSION NOTE

**RETHINKING DEMANDINGNESS:
WHY SATISFICING CONSEQUENTIALISM AND
SCALAR CONSEQUENTIALISM
ARE NOT LESS DEMANDING THAN
MAXIMIZING CONSEQUENTIALISM**

BY SPENCER CASE

Rethinking Demandingness: Why Satisficing Consequentialism and Scalar Consequentialism Are Not Less Demanding than Maximizing Consequentialism

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO OBJECT to a moral theory, such as maximizing consequentialism, on the grounds that it is too demanding? It is apparently to say that its requirements are implausibly stringent. This suggests an obvious response: Modify the theory so that its requirements are no longer as stringent. A consequentialist may do this either by placing the requirement threshold below maximization – thereby arriving at satisficing consequentialism – or, more radically, by dispensing with deontological notions such as “requirement” altogether – thereby arriving at scalar consequentialism. Suppose, however, that a moral theory’s demandingness is not a matter of its requirements being stringent, but whether it entails that we have most reason, all things considered, to undertake burdensome actions. If this is the right account of demandingness – as I shall argue – then neither modification necessarily alleviates demandingness. We are led to the surprising conclusion that neither satisficing consequentialism nor scalar consequentialism is inherently less demanding than their more familiar maximizing counterpart. They are less demanding only when supplemented with ancillary, and controversial, assumptions.

1.

Although we admire people who sacrifice to benefit strangers, few believe that the average American acts wrongly in failing to give nearly all of his disposable income to the desperately poor. According to maximizing consequentialism, however, such financial sacrifice is morally required. In his seminal paper, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972), Peter Singer argues along consequentialist lines that we are required to give to the desperately poor so long as none of the alternative expenditures is of comparable moral importance. Many philosophers, including some sympathetic to Singer’s conclusions, find this thought disturbing. If maximizing consequentialism is true, Shelly Kagan concludes, then “there is simply no limit to the sacrifices that might be asked of us by consequentialism. You might be asked to give up anything at all, provided only that doing so would make the greatest possible contribution to the overall good” (1998: 157). Brad Hooker notes that “many of us may on reflection think that it would be morally unreasonable to demand this level of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. ...” (2000: 150-51). Such demands, says Liam Murphy, “strike just about everyone as absurd – as

we say, a principle that makes such demands ‘just couldn’t be right’” (2000: 6).

Philosophers disagree about whether and to what degree these counter-intuitive results should count against a moral theory. Although some are prepared to accept that morality may be so demanding, many have explored versions of consequentialism that appear to rule with a lighter hand. One alternative, satisficing consequentialism, places the threshold for permissible action below optimization in at least some circumstances, making room for supererogatory actions (Slote and Pettit 1984: 143; Slote 2004: 14-29; Scheffler 1992: 377-97). A more radical alternative, scalar consequentialism, dispenses with deontic categories such as “requirement” and “wrongness” and evaluates actions only as better than or worse than other options according to the outcomes they produce (Norcross 2006). Both alternatives are consistent with the intuition that a person could fail to donate all of her disposable income to famine relief without thereby violating a moral requirement. That implication seems to make both theories less demanding than maximizing consequentialism. In what follows, I argue that this is not the case.

2.

Plausibly, some of the resistance to Singer’s conclusions about our duties of beneficence derives from philosophical intuition, not mere self-interest. But what intuition are skeptics reacting to? It may be an intuition about the scope and content of moral requirements to the effect that morality does not require this kind of financial sacrifice. Alternatively, some may be responding to the intuition that we do not have most reason, all things considered, to make such sacrifices. This, together with the widely held assumption that one always has, all things considered, most reason to abide by moral requirements, entails that Singer must be wrong about what morality requires.¹ Corresponding to these two intuitions are two different accounts of moral demandingness. On one account, which we may call the “requirements view,” a moral theory’s demandingness is the same as the burdensomeness of its requirements. The other possibility, which we may call the “reasons view,” holds that it is not a moral theory’s requirements per se that matter for demandingness, but what those requirements mean for what we have most all-things-considered reason to do.

Here is how we might flesh out the reasons view a bit further: To say that a moral theory is demanding is to say that it entails that we have most reason, all things considered, to undertake burdensome actions. We can gloss a burdensome action as one that comes at a significant cost to the agent per-

¹ See Stroud (1998) for an overview and defense of “moral overridingness” and Douglas Portmore (2011) for further discussion. For criticism, see Susan Wolf (1982), Philippa Foot (1978) and Samuel Scheffler (1992b).

forming it, is unpleasant to perform or is incompatible with the agent's deeply held life projects. One moral theory can be more demanding than another either by requiring a greater number of burdensome actions, or by requiring actions that are burdensome to a greater degree. A moral theory that entails that agents sometimes, though rarely, have most reason to perform burdensome actions would count as demanding, albeit minimally so. A moral theory that entails that we have most reason to continually undertake extremely burdensome actions would be very demanding indeed.

Does one of these accounts best capture the thought that maximizing consequentialism is unacceptably demanding? Or should we give up on the idea of "demandingness" as a univocal term and define "moral demandingness 1" as the stringency of a moral theory's requirements and "moral demandingness 2" as the implications of those requirements for our overall reasons to perform burdensome actions? Although we might distinguish different senses of demandingness, I believe that the reasons view makes the most sense of the intuition that an extremely demanding morality is somehow troubling. Consider an unenforced, onerous law that everyone agrees is useless, but not worth the bother of taking off the books. According to the requirements view, the dead-letter law counts as demanding. There is a sense in which that is true, but I doubt that it is the same sense in which philosophers worry about the demandingness of maximizing consequentialism. At least, I find it strange to worry about the demandingness of morality without regard to whether moral requirements have any more normative force than the dead-letter law.²

Although it is not dispositive, I think the reason view's accommodation of this intuition counts in favor of its being the best account of moral demandingness. I conclude that the reasons view of moral demandingness is at least as plausible as the competing requirements view, and perhaps more so. As we shall see, if this is correct, then the supposedly less-demanding alternatives to maximizing consequentialism may turn out not to be any less demanding, after all.

3.

In "Reasons Without Demands: Rethinking Rightness," Alastair Norcross anticipates an objection to the scalar consequentialism he champions: Intuitively, morality does not just suggest that we abstain from evildoing – it *requires* that we do. Scalar consequentialism includes no requirements; does this mean that it is insufficiently demanding? Norcross demurs, "[T]he fact that a state of affairs is bad gives reason to avoid producing it as much as would the fact that producing it is wrong" (2006: 46). The injunction, "Do not commit

² In *Human Morality*, Scheffler considers adopting views that downgrade the authority of morality as one possible remedy to the problem of over-demandingness (1992b: 17-28). This is not, however, the more sophisticated solution that Scheffler ultimately endorses (1992b: 115-32).

murder because it is wrong!” can be replaced with “Do not commit murder because it is very bad!” without any real loss.³

If this reply succeeds in defusing the under-demandingness objection, it does so at the cost of reviving the over-demandingness objection. Regardless of how we take “reason” in this context, we are not left with a clear picture of how scalar consequentialism ends up being inherently less demanding than maximizing consequentialism. If “reason” means “moral reason,” then, per the reasons view, the scalar consequentialist can avoid demandingness by rejecting the overridingness of morality. Of course, the same move would be available to the maximizing consequentialist. If “reason” means “most reason, all things considered,” then eliminating deontic categories from a moral theory appears not to affect that theory’s demandingness. To see this more clearly, consider the following argument:

1. Scalar consequentialism gives us as much reason to avoid murder-for-profit as does maximizing consequentialism.
2. Maximizing consequentialism gives us a decisive reason to avoid murder-for-profit.
3. Therefore, scalar consequentialism gives us a decisive reason to avoid murder-for-profit.
4. Scalar consequentialism gives us the same reason to donate all our disposable incomes to famine relief as it gives us to avoid murder-for-profit.

Therefore, scalar consequentialism gives us a decisive reason to donate all of our disposable income to famine relief.

The sub-argument to 3 dispels the under-demandingness concern for scalar consequentialism, but the further conclusion shows that both theories give us decisive reason to donate all of our disposable income to famine relief, a very burdensome course of action. According to the reasons view, this means that the two theories are equally demanding with regard to our positive duties to assist with famine relief. Notice that, according to the requirements view, scalar consequentialism, which lacks requirements, can never be demanding. Even if scalar consequentialism entailed that we have more reason to make these sacrifices than we would have if maximizing consequentialism were true, it could not, per the requirements view, count as demanding. If these implications seem implausible, then they constitute further evidence against the requirements view and in favor of the reasons view.

A detractor might think this line of reasoning overlooks differences between reasons and obligations that a proper analysis of demandingness must accommodate. It is widely held that obligations, unlike mere reasons, are tied

³ When this discussion occurs, Norcross is discussing motivational reasons rather than normative reasons. However, it is clear from the context that the same goes for normative reasons, too. And it must be so if he is to have an answer to the under-demandingness objection. Note also that, for Norcross, actions are not good or bad simpliciter, but only relative to alternatives. So for Norcross “very bad” would be short for “much worse than the available alternatives.”

to reactive attitudes. Guilt and resentment toward wrong acts are apt; they would not be apt toward merely suboptimal acts. So, maximizing consequentialism, which includes the category of wrongness, licenses blame and guilt for certain actions, whereas scalar consequentialism does not. That could be a basis for maintaining that maximizing consequentialism is more demanding than scalar consequentialism even if the two theories issue reasons of the same normative weight to undertake burdensome actions.

This proposal, though, does not make maximizing consequentialism *inherently* more demanding than scalar consequentialism. Maximizing consequentialism would be more demanding only in conjunction with two further theses: a) that there are reactive attitudes that are intrinsically fitting to wrong acts, and b) that this fittingness is relevant to demandingness. Neither assumption is obvious, nor intrinsic to maximizing consequentialism. In the course of his defense of maximizing utilitarianism, J. J. C. Smart endorses the idea that “the notion of the responsibility is a piece of metaphysical nonsense and should be replaced by ‘Whom would it be useful to blame?’” (Smart and Williams 1973: 54). Although consequentialism does not entail this, Smart is right to think that the view is consistent with consequentialism.

Consider, finally, two moral theories differing *only* in what they say about reactive attitudes. Theories A and B agree that Sam has most reason to do X, on the total strength of his reasons in favor of doing X. They agree even about the instrumental reasons in favor of blaming Sam. The only point of disagreement is that A claims that blame is apt for Sam’s failure to do X, whereas B – according to which no reactive attitudes are apt or fitting in any philosophically interesting way – does not. The intuition that A is more demanding than B may rely on the thought that being subject to negative reactive attitudes is burdensome, or that the desire to avoid being subject to them constitutes a reason for action. If so, then A gives Sam additional reasons for doing X. That would violate the stipulation that A and B agree on the total strength of the reasons that count in favor of Sam’s doing X – unless we imagine that B includes a different reason to do X that offsets this difference. The harder we think about what it would be like for two moral theories to differ *only* with regard to reactive attitudes, the less clear it is that the theories being considered differ in demandingness.

For this reason, I am suspicious of proposals that rely on reactive attitudes to distinguish the demandingness of maximizing consequentialism from that of scalar consequentialism. For similar reasons, I find it difficult to distinguish the demandingness of satisficing consequentialism from that of scalar consequentialism without relying on ancillary assumptions. Both theories agree that it is best to perform the optimal action, next best to perform the next best action and so forth. Suppose Sally can buy Susan one of two equally priced birthday presents, and that that buying any present is supererogatory, according to satisficing consequentialism. Susan will appreciate either of them, but Sally knows that option A will give Susan 25 more units of pleasure than option B will. Both scalar consequentialism and satisficing con-

sequentialism agree that A is better than B exactly to the degree that it produces more value.⁴

The two theories come apart when the smorgasbord of available actions includes some options that are below the satisficing threshold of whatever version of satisficing consequentialism is being considered. For the scalar consequentialist, these options will be very bad rather than wrong. But as we have seen, Norcross maintains that “wrong” and “bad” need not differ in normative force. If that is so, then scalar and satisficing consequentialism may have the same implications for what we have most reason to do, all things considered. The reasons view of demandingness does not distinguish between them.

It may seem obvious that relaxing or eliminating a moral theory’s requirements necessarily makes that theory less demanding. I have argued, however, that this is only true if we equate a moral theory’s demandingness with the burdensomeness of its requirements. On another and, I have argued, more plausible view of demandingness, the reasons view, this is not the case. Scalar and satisficing consequentialism are less demanding than maximizing consequentialism only in conjunction with additional, controversial assumptions.⁵

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⁴ I am assuming that pleasure is valuable.

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