

'Consequentialism is impossibly demanding. So it cannot be correct.' Discuss.

Although some forms of consequentialism are extremely demanding (though not impossibly so), the same can be said of certain deontological theories – and in any case this property of demandingness should not have any bearing on our assessment of a moral theory's correctness. Consequentialist theories are uniquely demanding only if one's conception of demandingness focusses exclusively on the demands a morality makes of agents, but this is an assumption which already rejects consequentialism in claiming that there is a morally relevant doing/allowing distinction. Moreover, there is no convincing reason why a correct moral theory should not make large demands of agents. In this essay, I first clarify what we mean by the demandingness of a moral theory, showing that if we do not presuppose a non-consequentialist position, some deontological theories appear unreasonably demanding.

Then, I demonstrate that not all forms of consequentialism are demanding, even on a non-consequentialist's view of demandingness.

Finally, I

argue that no consequentialist theory makes impossible demands of agents, and conclude that, whether or not a theory is consequentialist, the fact that it makes substantial demands of individuals is insufficient grounds for its rejection.

What does it mean to say that an ethical theory is demanding? As McElwee (2017) notes, there are many cases we may disagree with a theory's claim that an agent has a moral obligation to do something, but not all of these should be classified as demandingness objections. If theory T^1 requires me to stand on my head each Monday, my grounds for rejecting T^1 are that it is simply wrong about what matters morally, not that it is overly demanding. To oppose T^1 on account of its demandingness, I would need to concede that there are good moral reasons for me to stand on my head, but hold that all things considered, the costs to me of doing so are such that any theory which requires that is asking too much. We should therefore define the demandingness of a theory in terms of the costs it imposes on individuals bound to act in accordance with it: a theory T is more demanding on an individual than T' if over the course of their lifetime, the expected costs of complying with T are greater than the costs of complying with T' , relative to ignoring morality entirely (Sobel 2016, pp243-4).

- Phrased differently, McElwee describes the demandingness objection as being present in cases where "doing A is what is morally best, and what is overall best, but is not morally obligatory because the cost to the agent is too great."
- At this point, it is worth briefly examining the nature of moral obligations. Consequentialist theories, by their nature, offer an ordering over states, and actions to be taken in a given state. Given this information, it is something of an empty question to ask "Is action A obligatory?", because the answer is immaterial. One could adopt a satisficing version of consequentialism which arbitrarily deem an action permissible only if it yields at least P% goodness as the optimal one, but the fact would still remain that certain permissible actions are better than others. Since in consequentialism the blameworthiness and praiseworthiness of actions is somewhat independent from their wrongness or rightness (as blaming and praising are simply actions to be decided on under a standard consequentialist framework), it is not decision-relevant to others whether or not the action an agent took was permissible – all that matters is the consequences that *awere* (expected to be) produced. So, adopting a scalar form of consequentialism which does concerns not itself with calling actions obligatory or impermissible would entirely do away with any demandingness objections.

Consider now theory T^2 , which requires me to donate a kidney to a stranger. Certainly this theory is more demanding *on me* than a theory T^3 which does not require me to donate my kidney. But in order to talk about the demandingness of a theory simpliciter, we need some way of transforming the demands of T^2 and T^3 respectively on each individual into a single amount-of-demandingness quantity. If Sally will die without my kidney, T^3 seems to demand a huge amount from her, in permitting me to not donate

Commented [HW1]: In general, in exams or graded essays, I think it's probably best to keep the introduction very short and barebones. Giving more detail, like you do here, usually ends up using a bunch of terms that haven't been defined yet and/or making bold claims and not being able to back them up just yet. Both are bad things in philosophy, and leaving the detail out of the intro is an easy fix.

Commented [HW2]: Probably only worth putting this at the very start like this if this is going to be the main point you're arguing for.

Commented [HW3]: It's important to make clear at some point that notice the distinction between agents and patients. So, the first time you mention agents, its worth saying something like "as against patients". But you could just avoid using the term agents until a bit later.

Commented [HW4]: Let's talk about this. Sobel's line is that it's requiring/permitting distinction that's directly at play, and this is kind of an analogue for the doing/allowing distinction. The other line (both from him and Kagan) is that, without *also* accepting a doing/allowing distinction, accepting prerogatives in a particular way leads to verdicts like "It's permissible to murder Bob if you need a kidney"

Commented [HW5]: Seems like the notion of demandingness itself would be theory-neutral, so I'm not sure what a "non-consequentialist's view of demandingness" is.

Commented [RS6R5]: Would update his comment to say: *prima facie*, you wouldn't expect demandingness to be theory neutral. You make an argument later on that's convincing that it isn't theory-neutral, but you should talk about this there. Don't do overly detailed introductions!

Commented [HW7]: I think it's worth flagging very early on what you're taking to count as impossible. If it's that the theory demands that agents do things they actually can't do, then that'd be a very short discussion. Consequentialism, along with every other remotely widely-accepted moral theory, never says you ought to do something you can't. So, you get a more interesting topic if you latch onto a looser / more colloquial notion of "impossible": implausibly high; or perhaps just higher than any real-world agents will end up meeting.

Commented [HW8]: Since superscript numbers can also mean exponents, it's usually safer to use subscripts for this.

Commented [HW9]: Excellent

Commented [HW10]: The costs to them of them complying, or the costs to them of them *and others* complying? I think this'll matter a lot for what you say below.

Commented [HW11]: And presumably acting purely in self-interest? As is, it's not clear what we're supposed to take the counterfactual to be.

Commented [HW12]: Worth saying "states of affairs" rather than just "states". States are also a technical notion in decision theory, and the less ambiguity the better.

Commented [HW13]: This sounds like it might be a misinterpretation. I know that one of the readings said that scalar consequentialism stays silent about whether actions { ...

Commented [HW14]: Slightly separate from *worthiness*

Commented [HW15]: Ah, you meant scalar consequentialism above then?

it, and additionally prohibiting her from forcibly obtaining the kidney (Sobel 2016, p241). The only way to decisively conclude that T^2 is more demanding than T^3 is by arguing that some sorts of costs are more demanding than others: specifically, that it is more demanding to require that I take a costly action than it is to demand that Sally accepts her misfortune. Yet this method of assessing demandingness presupposes a morally relevant difference between costs borne by agents and costs borne by patients, which is a non-consequentialist premiss. Indeed, a consequentialist might well argue that T^3 is overall the more demanding theory, because (by their lights) the aggregated costs of compliance are greater than those of T^2 . Similarly, a critic might describe as overly demanding a theory T^4 which requires me to abandon my personal projects to do life-saving charity work, but have no qualms accepting a theory T^5 which prohibits me from engaging in projects which involve torturing others. Again, though, this conclusion rests on a non-consequentialist assumption – in this case, a distinction between doing harms and allowing harms. We cannot formulate a demandingness objection to a theory without relying on some prior beliefs which are fundamentally opposed to it, and so the fact that a theory appears demanding is not a reason to reject it.

- Not all consequentialist theories are demanding: ethical egoism is certainly consequentialist, but according to our definition above (where demandingness is in terms of costs above what would be felt complying with no moral theory), it has a demandingness of exactly zero for self-interested agents.
- Moreover, no consequentialist theory is impossibly demanding. (For ease of exposition, I demonstrate this only for simple act utilitarianism, but the same argument applies to other consequentialist theories.)
- The act utilitarian criterion of rightness states that an action is right if out of all actions open to an agent, no other leads to more moral value, where moral value is the impartial sum of all morally relevant individuals' welfare. According to maximising act utilitarianism, the optimal action is the only permissible one, and it is obligatory. But from this definition, there is no way for act utilitarianism to make impossible demands. If an action A is right (and thus required of an agent), then it must be one of the actions open to that agent. Humans are not able to work 24 hours every day earning money to give to charity, and utilitarianism would never make an impossible demand such as this, since the option of working 24 hours each day is not open to any agent.
- To reiterate, demandingness is not a good reason to reject a theory. Ethical egoism is highly undemanding, but that isn't even a pro tanto reason to favour it. If we are unhappy with "unreasonable" demands, this is a symptom of an underlying disagreement with its premisses, as opposed to an objection to the theory's demandingness per se.

Commented [HW16]: Good

Commented [HW17]: Make clear that this is a critic of consequentialism, specifically.

Commented [HW18]: Well, it depends. The view that "An act is permissible for an agent if its consequences are at least as good for the agent as every other available act" isn't consequentialist in an important sense: it's agent-relative. You could have a theory that's not agent-relative that says "An act is permissible for an agent if its consequences are at least as good for Amy as every other available act", but it'd have to say that even for agents who aren't Amy. And the standard sort of egoism is the first version.

Commented [HW19]: The point you make here is a good one, and worth starting the essay with. (By the way, the claim you're appealing to here is often called "Ought implies can".)

Bibliography

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