

A Defense of Utilitarianism

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I will attempt to defend utilitarianism from the demandingness objection. The sort of utilitarianism that I refer to throughout is the consequentialist moral theory that obligates us to maximize well-being. The form of utilitarianism I refer to is hedonistic, so maximizing well-being is done by maximizing happiness. Each action may be judged based on whether it was the best action to be taken for achieving the happiest state of affairs. This kind is distinct from rule utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism refers to the consequentialist theory where we ought to maximize well-being, but the right action adheres to a justified moral rule, and the rule is one such that it would maximize happiness if everyone followed it. The kind of utilitarianism I refer to is also maximizing: the obligation, no matter how stringent, will not be satisfied without being entirely fulfilled. If you are obligated to donate all your time and money to save children in some distant country, then donating some money and volunteering some time is not enough to satisfy the obligation. Some philosophers refer to a kind of satisficing utilitarianism in which our obligations may be reduced (say, your obligation would be to give 10% of your income rather than your entire livelihood to charity). These philosophers acknowledge more good can be done, but doing more is not quite required. I do not wish to address rule or satisficing utilitarianism, so the kind I refer to is act, hedonistic, maximalist utilitarianism.

The demandingness objection criticizes the stringency of the obligations that utilitarianism places on us. I will define what I think constitutes demandingness and then discuss whether such a conception applies only to utilitarianism. I will argue that demandingness is an aspect of other moralities, including ordinary morality, and we do not reject those on the grounds of over-demandingness even for ordinary morality. From this, I argue that we should reconsider rejecting utilitarianism on the grounds of demandingness. I concede that utilitarianism is demanding, but I argue that its demandingness (to the extent that we want to reject it) is not an

inherent feature of utilitarianism but rather a consequence of the current state of the world. This discussion then segues into a discussion of whether failing to meet utilitarian obligations slates one as “wrong” or if it is possible to be imperfect but morally decent. I will conclude that it is possible to fail to meet obligations without being considered some kind of moral monster. Overall, my main goal is to defend utilitarianism from the demandingness objection by arguing that it is demanding but not overly so.

Defining Demandingness

Demandingness as an objection may be defined in different manners. When objecting to utilitarianism, it is typically used in the sense that utilitarianism either asks too much too often such that it violates how much morality may require of a person, or it interferes too greatly with our personal pursuits. I will take demandingness in this essay to mean the latter. By personal pursuits I mean that we are inclined by nature to want to pursue (typically non-altruistic) goals, commitments, or projects that are significant to us and the meaning of our lives. Personal pursuits may be as meaningful as the goal of becoming a mother or as trivial as wanting to buy tickets to a concert of an artist you like. I think that moral obligations that are highly demanding on this understanding would heavily interfere with these meaningful pursuits. Ones that are overly-demanding interfere excessively or inappropriately so that we are left with an obligation that we should (and likely want to) reject.

Utilitarianism, as it is commonly understood now, does generate obligations that are considered as interfering with personal pursuits. For example, say you would like to attend a concert to support an artist you like. It is likely that utilitarianism would require that you not spend money on the concert tickets and instead spend it on something that would produce more

utility. You may be required to donate to a charity that distributes mosquito nets to malaria-prone populations or to contribute to funding research that would create a cure to cancer. Even though buying concert tickets for yourself would generate utility, there are other possible courses of action that would generate more utility, and these courses of action would likely constitute an interference on your personal pursuits. You would be required to spend your time and/or money in ways that you are not committed to. This does not seem particularly demanding, though. A better example of utilitarianism generating demanding obligations (where your personal pursuits would be heavily interfered with) might be being required to follow a different career path. Say you have a serious passion for studio art, and you see yourself pursuing a career as a studio artist because you want to do something you love. However, you have the skills to be an excellent consultant, and you would be much more financially successful as a consultant than as a studio artist. Utilitarianism may obligate you to become a consultant and put that money earned towards charity, in which case you would not be able to pursue a full career in studio art. Even though you would be miserable as a consultant, the overall utility of the world would increase if you worked as a consultant and used the money earned to save lives through philanthropic donations. So, we can see how utilitarianism may generate obligations that interfere with our personal pursuits, possibly even to the point where we should reject them.

Other moral theories and ordinary morality are typically not seen as highly demanding; ordinary morality may require you to pause or relinquish your meaningful pursuits, but it does not obligate you to do so over-intrusively. An example of ordinary morality interfering with personal pursuits in a palatable manner would be a situation in which you come across a drowning child in a pond on your way to a life-changing job interview. You would be obligated to save the child, even if it means missing the job interview or showing up in soaking wet

clothes. Such an interference is not seen as demanding, though. In other words, non-consequentialist theories typically do not seem to necessitate interference of your meaningful personal pursuits as extensively as a theory like utilitarianism. As Williams argues, utilitarianism precludes genuine (identity-conferring for him) personal pursuits on the basis that its obligations require us to consider them as prioritized over our own commitments.¹ Consequently, this is thought to provide reason for us to reject utilitarianism: whether altruistic or not, these personal pursuits are a result of human nature, so a correct moral theory must be able to accommodate them. I will argue that the assumption that other moral theories do not as extensively interfere with our personal pursuits is incorrect. Then, I will conclude that these other moralities are similarly highly demanding but not rejected on that basis, and so I will go on to question the basis of such an objection applying to utilitarianism.

Establishing the Demandingness of Other Morality

I will attempt to establish two ways in which other moralities are highly demanding: one, they may be highly demanding in their obligations in a similar way to utilitarianism (i.e. significant personal pursuits are interfered with) and two, they may be highly demanding by not placing demands on us to help others, in which case those who need help are required to pay high costs (like their lives). Rather than the classic interpretation in which we say “this demands something of us,” it can be said that those who have to pay such high costs (given that they interfere with their personal pursuits) are being demanded of in an indirect sense.

Firstly, we know that other moralities may be demanding, though we think they are not as demanding as utilitarianism. A common example is the requirement for Kantians to not lie or deceive others or yourself. In practice, such a requirement can be extremely demanding. Let’s

¹ J.J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams. *Utilitarianism*. (Cambridge University Press, 1973), <https://books.google.com/books/about/Utilitarianism.html?id=J0w3ER2fWv4C>.

say your brother just robbed a bank, and you help house him after the fact because he is your brother and you want to protect him. Such an urge might be misguided, but it is understandable: many people do have a commitment to protect their family from harm. To make it more palatable, let's say your brother robbed the bank in a misguided attempt to acquire money to help pay for medical bills that you have accumulated from being very sick. A police officer arrives at your door to ask if you know where the culprit is. Under Kantianism, you would be required to not lie to the police officer. That does not necessarily mean that you would have to tell them the truth, but being required to not lie could be considered demanding. You are committed to defending and protecting your brother, and being morally required to not lie would constitute an interference with that commitment since you cannot adequately defend him without lying. So, Kantianism may generate obligations that interfere with one's personal pursuits, in which case the obligations may be considered demanding. Kantianism is not the only moral theory that may generate demanding obligations, though. Ordinary morality may be another example of a morality that generates demanding obligations.

Before elaborating on the kind of obligations ordinary morality generates, I will attempt to define ordinary morality. Ordinary morality describes the shared intuitions that we have developed (normally as a result of our society and culture) that guide our actions and responses. For example, if someone comes across a child drowning in a shallow pond, and the only sacrifice we would make is that our clothes would get wet, we would think that the person should save the drowning child. If the person does not save the drowning child, we would think of them as morally wrong: who doesn't save a child about to die when it would cost them next to nothing? This example provides one way to see how ordinary morality generates obligations, though we don't typically view them as "obligations" per se.

Another example would be the general principle to not harm. Singer describes an example in which someone (let's call her Anna) is set to inherit a great fortune from her uncle. Anna could tell her uncle that the money would do much more good if he donated to some charity instead of giving it to her. We would generally say that she is not obligated to tell her uncle this; she may choose to, but her not telling her uncle this is not morally wrong. Anna also has the option of murdering her uncle so that she ensures her receiving the fortune. This is something that we think is wrong; she is certainly not permitted to kill her uncle to get his fortune. The cost of not killing her uncle (possibly receiving nothing) is equal to the cost of telling him he would do more good by donating it all to charity. The reason we think it is wrong to kill him but okay to refrain from telling him about donating is because of ordinary morality. Ordinary morality generates this negative obligation where we should forego an opportunity to harm, but it does not generate the positive obligation to help². Typically, adhering to ordinary morality is not particularly seen as demanding, like with these examples. However, this does not mean that ordinary morality does not generate demanding obligations. Ordinary morality does generate demanding obligations, and yet we hesitate to reject ordinary morality despite such requirements.

An example of ordinary morality being demanding may be being a parent. Being a parent requires that we provide the bare minimum care to the child. Being a bad parent entails abusing or neglecting the child. However, being a good parent requires both providing care for the child and loving the child; it is difficult to call a parent "good" when they neither care for nor love the child. Additionally, we ought to be good parents; being a good parent is not supererogatory.

² Peter Singer, "Review of *A Refutation of Ordinary Morality*, by Shelly Kagan," *Ethics* 101, no. 3 (1991): 627. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381473>.

Cases in which the child is extremely developmentally disabled such that they require constant and lifelong care from parents can exemplify the demandingness of ordinary morality. Taking care of such a child can be so exhausting that it is almost as though parents become too tired to love. Alternatively, some parents might drop the ball on caring for the child or hand them off to an outside caretaker; society still typically condemns parents who fail to meet the standard of caring for their child. If society obligates us to care for and love our children but caring for our children makes loving them difficult³, then it seems as though such an obligation is highly demanding. It is extremely difficult to be a person outside of being a parent in this situation: you are obligated to give up most pursuits that do not contribute to or could actively detract from being a good parent. However, despite these lofty demands, few would reject ordinary morality. In this situation, we may have empathy for the parent who finds it difficult to love their child, but we would most likely not find the demandingness present as sufficient for rejecting the obligation or the morality that generates the obligation. It may be understandable if one fails to fulfill it, but that does not make the obligation any less present.

So, ordinary morality can also be highly demanding without immediately entailing rejection; from there, I hope that we can hold utilitarianism as highly demanding without that constituting a reason to reject it entirely. However, one might object to the comparison: the demandingness of ordinary morality is not comparable to the demandingness of utilitarianism. The demanding obligation to care for a severely disabled child is clearly interfering with meaningful personal pursuits, but this obligation applies to few people. In other words, utilitarianism seems to demand so much of so many people, whereas ordinary morality seems to

³ It may seem like a valid response to say that difficult to love does not mean unloving, but anecdotally this does not seem common. Within the situation, it is often discussed how lacking the parental love for the child can be — especially if the child requires constant care and makes it difficult (say if the child is violent).

demand so much only of few people. We don't need to reject the moral theory on the whole just because some people are under demanding obligations. On the other hand, the scope of utilitarianism is broader such that it seems to cross some intuitive threshold that enables our calling it objectionable.

Highly demanding utilitarian obligations do not affect the entirety of the population, though. The burden of obligation would absolutely reach more people than the example used, but this conception of utilitarianism would have the burden of obligation fall primarily on the group of people capable of providing care to those in need. Additionally, the number of people who are affected by the ordinary moral obligation to be a good parent (whether caring for the child is particularly demanding or not) is determined partly by chance; if more people had children that required extensive care, then this obligation would apply to more people. In that case, having demandingness contingent on the number of people affected means demandingness is contingent on the state of the world. So, it could be that this obligation is as broad as a similar utilitarian obligation, in which case it would be inconsistent to reject one theory for a trait that applies to both.

However, this may feel unsatisfying. It seems more accurate to separate the demandingness of an obligation and the demandingness of a theory. Moral theories may generate demanding obligations, but this is not sufficient for labeling the theory as demanding. A theory must generate demanding obligations in order to be considered demanding. It seems as though ordinary morality may generate demanding obligations, but that is not a necessary consequence of adhering to it. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, might be thought to necessarily generate overly-demanding obligations.

Even if one does not consider obligations like the one requiring us to be good parents as enough to constitute considering ordinary morality as demanding, we don't need to say that the only way for a theory to be considered demanding is by its necessarily generating demanding obligations. Ordinary morality can be considered demanding in other ways. The typical way to conceive of demandingness is the way in which we automatically assume that things that are required of us are more demanding than things that are permitted to befall others. It is the state of being required by morality (typically at some cost) that somehow permits us to label the action as demanding; it seems inappropriate to call something demanding when nothing is actually being required. This should be questioned, though. David Sobel discusses a relevant kidney transplant case to illustrate: Joe has two kidneys and would live a decent life if he only had one, whereas Sally will die if she does not receive one kidney. It would be considered overly-demanding for Joe to be required to give up his kidney⁴. The case demonstrates that if someone is required to donate his kidney, it is more demanding than someone being allowed to die. How is being required to give up a kidney more demanding than being allowed to die? The cost of a kidney is, by most standards, less than the cost of a life. Even if the cost were the same, being required to donate a kidney will be seen as more demanding than being allowed to lose a kidney. We see demanding as literally making demands, which theories like utilitarianism do, so we conclude that utilitarianism is demanding while ordinary morality is not.

Sobel provides reasons to reconsider this, though. As Fiona Woollard puts it, “the demandingness objection is about what is *demande*d of the agent: it focuses on costs to the agent as a moral agent”⁵. Sobel argues that this is a matter of linguistics; “demands” must be

⁴ David Sobel, “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection,” U-M Library Digital Collections, September 2007, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/phimp/3521354.0007.008/1>.

⁵ Fiona Woollard, “V—Dimensions of Demandingness.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 116, no. 1 (2016): 92. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26781282>.

requirements placed on agents because that is how we define the word. Demandingness does not need to be so direct, though. Rather than define demandingness through requirements, it seems more reasonable to identify it with costs incurred. For example, utilitarianism may generate an obligation to maintain a friendship. If the friendship is healthy, that does not seem particularly demanding. It seems reasonable that some obligation to maintain a friendship becomes demanding when costs begin to be paid, like if there is an obligation to maintain a toxic friendship. The example demonstrates that demandingness really only begins to occur when we begin paying costs, not when we are required or obligated to do something.

If a moral theory requires someone to pay some cost, then it is the cost that determines whether we may label it as demanding, not the requiring. Costs do not always result from requirements, though. Sometimes moral theories allow for things such that someone may end up paying some cost. For example, ordinary morality allows for Joe to not divest himself of a kidney, though this means that Sally will pay the price of her life. Defining demandingness by costs means that we would say that this is demanding of Sally. Why should this be considered demanding? It seems to make more sense to stick with the original linguistic interpretation of demand where we only look at requirements than it does to allow for any cost incurred to be considered demanding. Sobel addresses this: we should not stick with the original interpretation while invoking the traditional demandingness objection because doing so begs the question against the consequentialist. The original interpretation presupposes that requiring certain costs is more objectionable than allowing certain costs, which we do not have reason to presuppose⁶. This definition of demandingness is then used to object to consequentialist theories to argue that consequentialist theories require too much. The objection claims that the theories ought to be

⁶ Sobel, "The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection."

rejected because they require too much, but it does so on the basis of assuming that requiring costs is more objectionable than allowing them. Reorienting demandingness to center on costs incurred maintains the apparent key component of demands while avoiding this issue, even if it means that demandingness is more expansive than what we took it as before. I'll take to calling this conception of demandingness as indirect demands since many costs incurred are often incurred by others' inaction rather than their actions.

For indirect demands, we have a choice between being permitted to do something while someone else suffers a cost and not being permitted to do something while we suffer a (most likely) lesser cost. That is not to say that we are demanding that cost of them. Indirect demands, because they are costs, may be better interpreted as being placed on those paying the costs. So, when theories like ordinary morality allow people to act in such a way that others suffer costs, we can say that there is a demand being placed on the person who suffers. To be considered indirectly demanding, costs would have to heavily interfere with personal pursuits. If these costs are the result of a moral theory's operations, then it is not unreasonable to say that the moral theory is demanding in the indirect sense. Let's look at Sobel's kidney case:

1. If Joe is not required to donate his kidney, he will not donate his kidney.
2. If Joe does not donate, Sally will die.
3. Joe is not required to donate.
4. Sally will die.

Joe being allowed to not aid Sally will result in Sally's death⁷. Because he is not required to initiate her death, we should not consider this a direct demand. However, because this non-

⁷ I use Sobel's example, but I would like to briefly acknowledge that it may be the case that Joe's aid does not come in the form of donating his own kidney. It is likely that he (anyone, really) is under the obligation to help her receive a needed kidney, not that he give her his own. This isn't to say he needs to steal one. Maybe he just needs to develop

requirement does cost Sally a price she would not have to pay if he had been required to act, we can consider this an indirect demand. Look at it from Sally's perspective: Joe would be able to live a normal life after donating. Nothing particularly important to him would be inhibited or significantly hindered if he donated. Sally, on the other hand, would lose everything (and everyone would lose her). It is reasonable for her to think that her life is being asked of her, which is demanding. It is not that Joe is demanding her life from her, but a demand is placed on her life by lack of requirement to help.

Such indirect demands are generated by ordinary morality. Part of the appeal of ordinary morality is that costly requirements are infrequent and seem to be justifiable when they do occur (e.g. emergencies). However, lack of costly requirements entails costs incurred by those in need of aid. In other words, under ordinary morality, lack of direct demands results in more indirect demands. While ordinary morality possibly may not generate demanding obligations, the theory itself can still be considered demanding when indirect demands are accounted for. If we remain steadfast in maintaining that ordinary morality should not be rejected, then we ought to reconcile the idea that a moral theory can be demanding without being rejected.

Utilitarianism As A Demanding Theory

In this section, I hope to show that utilitarianism is not as demanding as it is often labeled. I will concede that utilitarianism may still be demanding, but it is not overly-demanding as the traditional objection claims. If we look at the original objection, it claims that essentially any non-altruistic action is morally wrong under utilitarianism. We are obligated to always work towards promoting happiness, but the world is so unhappy that even if we constantly and tirelessly worked, it seems as though the task would never be completed. This may seem overly-

an artificial kidney for her or move her up a donor waitlist. In order to make my point, I will take Sobel's example to mean that the only viable kidney is Joe's, for whatever reason.

demanding since people want to be able to pursue non-altruistic goals. The sheer amount of suffering in the world is typically cited as the reason for such stringent requirements. I think that there is a relevant distinction between types of suffering based on systematicity at both general and specific levels that will allow us to examine the true demandingness of utilitarianism.

There seem to be systemic, like poverty, and non-systemic causes, like disease, of suffering. Additionally, they operate at general levels and specific instances. At the general level, we as individuals would be unable to affect much change, but we are capable of doing so at the specific. Institutions may be more capable of affecting change at the general level and less so at the specific. Systemic causes of suffering are a by-product of the current state of the world. In other words, they are contingent on human conduct. At the general level we have the systematic nature of the cause (e.g. poverty or famine), and at the specific we have the instances of suffering (a homeless young woman or starving old man). Because we live in a world capable of advanced technology and globalized institutions, suffering from systemic causes at both the general level and specific level is possible to alleviate by eliminating the causes. Alternatively, there might be a world in which these causes of suffering do not exist. Let's look at a scenario I'll call fake-Earth: we colonize a distant Earth-like planet and begin by sending fifty or so people over there. Would that world have people suffering from poverty? It seems like it would not. Famine might be probable, but it seems like that could be resolved without interfering with personal pursuits. I would say preventing or fixing such issues would become personal pursuits, in which case requirements could not be demanding.

On the other hand, non-systemic causes of suffering are contingent on human existence and the nature of the world. Suffering resulting from these is possible to alleviate at the specific level (e.g. a child suffering from abuse or a person infected with tuberculosis), but the general

level (abuse or disease) seems impossible to alleviate. For example, we can look at natural disasters: at the general level, we are susceptible to natural disasters because we exist, we exist as physically fallible beings, and we live in an unstable world that can generate things like earthquakes and tsunamis that can target our physical weaknesses. This cannot be eradicated (at least, given our current state of technology). At the specific level, we can predict natural disasters, evacuate, and rescue. If we look at the colony example, disease or disaster is something that would be present from the start. Fake-Earth would have terrain (let's say it has a volcano that erupts unpredictably) that would create suffering should it affect the colonizers. Would that world experience suffering from a natural disaster? Probably.

This distinction shows that a great deal of suffering is not a necessary consequence of the world. Because the world is in a state of emergency, the current demandingness of utilitarianism is as high as it is. If the world could exist not in a state of emergency, it is likely that utilitarian obligations would not be as highly demanding as they are now. It is possible for the world to not be in such a state of emergency. So, it seems likely that utilitarian obligations would not be as demanding.

The more relevant issue is if the obligations would remain overly-demanding. Fake-Earth should illustrate the least amount of suffering that a world with humans can be susceptible to, so if this is shown as not having overly-demanding utilitarian obligations, then utilitarianism ought not be considered overly-demanding. On fake-Earth, it should be possible to exist without systemic causes of suffering at any level. There would be no poverty at the general and no homelessness as an effect of poverty at the individual level. It seems probable that non-systemic causes of suffering would exist at the general level that would induce suffering at the individual level. It would be difficult to avoid natural disasters or susceptibility to disease, which would

entail needing to alleviate someone's suffering from dying in a flood or anemia. Relieving others' suffering might come at a high cost to your personal pursuits, though, in which case the requirement to do so might be overly-demanding. For example, let's say fake-Earth experiences acid rain, which can be fatal for humans if contact is prolonged. The colonizers prepared for this by bringing an adequate supply of acid-rain suits. The suits are effective in protecting against the rain, but they are imperfect and will not completely prevent injury. One day on fake-Earth, there is a freak acid rainstorm. Many members of the colony are far from the main supplies (specifically the suits), and because the rainstorm was not foreseen, almost all of the members on the excursion are left without reliable protection from the acid rain. You and some other colony members stayed close to the supplies, though. Knowing that the acid rain could kill people who are left unprotected, you have two options: put yourself at risk of death in order to save the lives of your buddies, or preserve yourself entirely by allowing them to possibly die.

Utilitarianism would likely require that you and your suited-up buddies go out and rescue your non-suited-up buddies. You probably would want to prioritize your life over those of your buddies, so the utilitarian requirement would be highly demanding. Given that your life may be at stake, the requirement could be considered overly-demanding, though I argue that it would likely not be.

Firstly, the possibility of dying does not make the obligation necessarily overly-demanding. It is possible to face an obligation in which a cost may be your life without needing to reject that obligation. For example, let's say you are at home with your young child. You fall asleep, and you wake up to smoke and realize your house is burning with you and your child still in it. You would likely be obligated to save your child, even though doing so puts you at risk of dying from the fire or smoke. It is doubtful that this obligation would be overly-demanding if the

fire is minor. Let's say the fire has progressed greatly, and it seems highly probable that if you attempt to save your child, you would die as well. Even still, it is doubtful that this obligation would be overly-demanding for you. You are already in the house, and it is still likely that you will die anyway, so you should at least attempt to save your child even though it could be costlier. If you decided to abandon your child, you would likely feel as though you failed an obligation (to protect your child), not as though you should not have been obligated to do so. The risk of dying, then, does not necessarily make an obligation overly-demanding.

Next, the possibility of partial compliance is a relevant consideration for determining demandingness. The obligation in this situation would be to depart from safety and risk one's life to save the colony members. This obligation would apply to everyone who is able to assist the colony members at risk: you and your buddies who can suit up. Because there are multiple people, the burden of obligation would be split, so the obligation would transform into one in which each person ought to save some, not all, of their buddies. The lesser obligation should reduce the risk to one's life; it is plausible that you would be able to escape significant harm if you only have to save a few people. If there is less risk, there is an accompanying reduction in demandingness. Being required to save people at not much cost to yourself is typically not overly-demanding, like if you come across a child drowning in a lake. So, the lesser obligation can be described as not overly-demanding.

The lesser obligation can only occur if each person who has the ability to save will save some, though. If some of the members who can suit up and save choose not to, then the obligation would accommodate their noncompliance. So, the maximal obligation in this scenario would be that you ought to save all of the people that you can, which is an obligation that has a high probability of your death. This would entail the most demandingness of the possible

obligations generated, so if it is determined that this obligation is not overly-demanding, then it seems as though utilitarianism would not be inherently overly-demanding.

We should consider if the maximal obligation is what would be optimific, though. It would not be required to act non-optimifically under utilitarianism, so if the maximal obligation does not create the ideal state of affairs, then it would not be required. Under the maximal obligation, it is likely that you would not be able to save everybody. You would also probably lose your life or at least sustain serious damage. Comparatively, the lesser obligation would require you to save fewer people at likely less cost to your well-being. The difference between the lesser and maximal obligations is the behaviors of others. So, if there is partial or noncompliance of others, the only apparent route seems to be the maximal obligation. That is false. An alternate obligation (which I'll refer to as the alternate route) would be to compel those who are not complying into compliance. This would allow one to move away from the maximal obligation to the lesser obligation. Compelling the others could generate disutility depending on the methods, so we should evaluate which option is optimific.

With the maximal obligation, disutility is generated in the people who die because you are unable to save them, the people who die because you didn't save them (if you fail to meet your obligation to some degree), and whatever suffering you experience. With the alternate route, you may experience disutility in compelling your comrades to save the others depending on the means. Your comrades may experience disutility from being compelled. Additionally, there is disutility if anyone is injured during the rescue attempt or if some in need of rescue do not receive it. Overall, it seems likely that the alternate route would generate less disutility, in which case it would likely be the optimific action, so it would be the required action in the fake-Earth scenario.

We ought to now evaluate if the alternate route is overly-demanding; if not, then it should indicate that utilitarianism as a whole is not inherently overly-demanding. It is possible that the alternate route is overly-demanding. Compulsion of this kind could entail some cost that would interfere with your personal pursuits. I will draw from Elizabeth Ashford's argument that moral obligations may influence one's self-conception to explain its interference⁸. Personal pursuits may include moral pursuits, which have an associated psychological self-conception. If I am committed to learning a language, I would consider myself a language student. Similarly, if I am committed to fulfilling my moral obligations, I would consider myself a good person⁹. This is an example of a moral self-conception. Generally, people have an unspoken commitment to being a morally decent person and thus maintaining a good moral self-conception. Being required to compel your comrades to risk their well-being, though for an honorable cause, could negatively influence your moral self-conception. You could see yourself as some kind of dictator, which could constitute interference and be considered demanding. It is possible that you would view yourself so horribly after compelling your comrades (no matter your method of compulsion) that such an interference is excessive. However, this seems to describe the extent of interference, and it does not seem likely that this would entail rejection of the requirement. Being obligated to follow the alternate route seems like it would not be considered overly-demanding, then. If so, then it seems as though utilitarianism is not inherently overly-demanding and that its demandingness is a consequence of the state of the world. If the demandingness is not an inherent trait, then it would be wrong to reject the moral theory for a trait that is not a necessary aspect of it.

⁸ Elizabeth Ashford, "Utilitarianism, Integrity, and Partiality." *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 8 (2000): 423-424. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2678423>.

⁹ Assuming that the judgment of "good" is in context of the morality that generates the obligations. I would think it's possible to fulfill all moral obligations and be considered not good.

In summary, highly demanding utilitarian obligations are generated by great suffering. Suffering is typically caused by issues in the world, which I distinguish into systemic and non-systemic. These causes operate at the general level and at the individual level. Because suffering from a majority of these causes are a consequence of the state of the world, the demanding utilitarian obligations they generate are a consequence of the state of the world. Because they are not a necessary aspect of the theory, it is strange to reject the theory because of them. There may be overly-demanding obligations even in the state of the world with the least suffering, but it seems that they do not turn out to be overly-demanding upon further examination. So, we are able to consider utilitarianism as a demanding, but not overly-demanding, theory.

Moral Imperfection Under Utilitarianism

Even if utilitarianism may be considered as not inherently overly-demanding in some idealized world, there is still the issue that the demands generated in the current world are nearly impossible for us to satisfy. We do live in a world with systemic causes of suffering, and those are not going away any time soon. Additionally, we don't even know our exact obligations: what is optimistic might be different from what we think, and so we could be unknowingly failing to meet our obligations. We would still be morally wrong in that case, which could be demanding by damaging our moral self-conception. Being morally wrong is absolute; if I donated less of my income than I should have, I would be morally equivalent to the person who tortured puppies for fun. Few people want to think they're as morally wrong as clearly evil others for slight offenses.

Utilitarianism does separate wrongness and blameworthiness, but this does not account for the fact that almost every action is probably morally wrong when operating under utilitarianism in the current state of the world. By this account of moral judgment, almost all of us are conducting ourselves wrongly — whether we murder someone for \$5 or use \$5 to buy

ourselves a coffee. We can say that the coffee-buyer does not deserve blame, but they still receive the label of the categorical “moral wrong.” People do not want to be morally wrong for almost everything they do, especially when they do things they consider objectively morally good. There shouldn’t be any disincentive to achieve the state of affairs with the maximum happiness, and the binary view of moral wrongness seems to disincentivize people from even attempting to maximize happiness. So, this method of conducting moral judgments seems contradictory to utilitarianism’s goals.

Utilitarianism is flexible, though, and allows for whatever means possible that will yield the best consequences. Moral judgments still constitute actions, so it is possible to shift from the right or wrong dichotomy to something more adaptive. Richard Arneson posits a “degrees of wrongness” concept that seems to better encapsulate our attitudes regarding passing judgments¹⁰. This move would allow for moral imperfection, which is something that reflects our general conduct more accurately and is more likely to be conducive to utilitarian goals. Rather than an act being simply morally right or wrong, its label depends on its distance from the optimistic state of affairs. In a sense, there should be some ideal state of affairs that is dependent on specific means, and the closer the means that you take are to the specific means for the best consequence, then the more morally good you are. Moral perfection could be the equivalent of receiving a 100% on an assignment, and moral imperfection could vary from being close to morally perfect (like receiving a 95%) to failing (like receiving a 30%). This allows for you to still be morally decent when taking steps to meet highly demanding moral obligations while still accounting for the fact that the obligation exists and that you should still be attempting to satisfy it fully.

¹⁰ Richard J. Arneson, “What Do We Owe to Distant Needy Strangers.” (2009).

This move seems like it downplays the difference between the ideal state of affairs and the non-ideal. To some extent, this should be a good thing. When you act to produce a situation that is almost identical to the ideal state of affairs save for slightly less pleasure, is there truly such a difference that entails calling conduct in one as morally good and another as morally bad? For example, say you are buying a birthday cake for a friend, and you pick their favorite color for the icing. Unbeknownst to you, your friend just had an epiphany and realized that there is another color that better suits their tastes. At the birthday party, you present your mis-colored cake to your friend. Your friend would have been happier with their favorite color icing, though they were happy enough with the cake as it was. Regardless, though, you did not act optimifically, and you should have gotten icing in the correct color. To claim that you are morally wrong does not seem to capture the nuances of the situation. While it is true that you did not fulfill the utilitarian obligation, the difference between the ideal state of affairs and the actual is minor. I could have poisoned her cake; such an action seems like it would entitle the strength of that label. Being slightly short of morally perfect would more accurately express judgment regarding your actions. It's not that you're plainly wrong: morality should acknowledge that you ought to have acted differently while accounting for how much differently you should have acted. Doing so better reflects human nature, which no compelling moral theory can ignore.

The example given is not representative of many failures to meet utilitarian obligations, though. Often the cost is not such a trivial amount of happiness but can mean someone's life or even many lives. For example, say you are playing with kids by a pond. You playfully throw two of them in, though you did not know that neither could swim. Both children start drowning. You have the ability to rescue both. But, you don't notice them drowning immediately. Once you do notice, you rescue them without thinking, which leads you to dive after the child who had been

drowning for less time. Saving the second child leads to the first child being underwater for too long, and it becomes too late to save him, so he dies. It seems wrong to say that you acted short of moral perfection — you did act wrongly in this situation. You had the ability to save both children, so you should have found a way to save them both.

This is not necessarily a significant issue for this method of judgment, though. If the difference between the state of affairs resulting from your actions and the ideal state of affairs is significant, then almost morally perfect is an inaccurate judgment to give. Such a situation would entitle calling your action much less than morally perfect¹¹. The state of affairs from the actions you took and the ideal state of affairs are significantly different, and so the accurate moral judgment would reflect the degree of difference. So, your actions would fall far less than morally perfect — probably somewhere closer to the opposite end of the spectrum.

This framework relates to demandingness in that it can be another way to lessen the apparent over-demandingness of utilitarianism. Over-demandingness is an obligation so demanding that we ought to reject it. Part of the reason we reject some obligations is that the bar is so high that it would require a lot from us to fulfill it, and partial compliance on our part still would not be good enough to net any moral praise or goodness. Unless we act ideally, we would be acting wrongly. Constantly acting wrongly or in significant ways tends to imply that one is a bad person, even if you are not blameworthy. Few people want to be bad, so this influences one's rejection of moral obligations. What moral imperfection allows is the alteration of that label: it would be more nuanced to receive the label of morally imperfect for either your actions or yourself. Most people are fine with imperfection, and such a label reduces the need to reject

¹¹ There is an issue regarding what would constitute the “right” assignment of moral perfection or imperfection, but I think that is an issue that is beyond the scope of this discussion. I do think we can generalize by relativizing to the ends of the spectrum.

one's obligations. Being morally right is a high bar to meet under most conceptions of morality, and the term morally perfect better encapsulates that falling short may not be that horrible.

To exemplify this, we can look at the maximal obligation from the fake-Earth scenario. That obligation requires you to save all of your buddies that you can while risking your life; failing to save just one (that you could have saved) would toss you into the moral failure bin. Such an action would also put you in the same category as those who never tried to save them at all. It is natural for us to distinguish between trying and failing (or almost succeeding) versus never even trying. If I would be as morally bad as the people who didn't risk their lives, then what reason would I have to not reject this demanding obligation? Moral imperfection would allow you to distinguish your actions from total noncompliance. Acting in a way that is morally equivalent to earning a 93% recognizes the fact that you should have saved that last person while accommodating for the fact that you did act almost morally perfectly. If there can be a meaningful distinction between attempting and failing and not attempting at all, then the incentive to reject demanding obligations is reduced, and so over-demandingness is reduced.

The move from the simple rightness and wrongness distinction to a more nuanced spectrum of perfection and imperfection is both more reflective of our nature and capable of reducing some possible over-demandingness. People do feel that there is a meaningful difference between failing to achieve the ideal state of affairs and making the state of affairs worse, and to group the two under the same label is to ignore that meaningful difference. To be morally wrong is to say that you should have acted otherwise, but that is too broad. A conception of moral imperfection would better capture the nuances from failure to meet moral obligations, which better reflects our thoughts on the matter. Allowing for moral imperfection and degrees of it could also reduce over-demandingness of obligations. Being purely morally wrong seems to

discourage demanding obligations because even trying and failing will earn one the label of moral wrongness. Accounting for the distance between the realized state of affairs and the ideal should reduce the disincentive and thus reduce over-demandingness.

Conclusion

I began by laying out a definition of demandingness that encapsulates the conflict between what we want to do and what we are required to do. I distinguish between demanding and overly-demanding. Over-demandingness occurs when what we are required to do interferes so much that we ought to reject that requirement. Utilitarianism is often taken as a demanding theory, so much so that it is objected to for its demandingness. Using the distinction, utilitarianism seems overly-demanding. I argue from analogy that ordinary morality may also be considered demanding, and it is unlikely that we would reject ordinary morality. So, a theory may be demanding without necessitating rejection. I then go on to address whether utilitarianism is inherently overly-demanding. I argue that it is not because the demanding obligations are a consequence of the state of the world, which can be shown by the demandingness of obligations generated in an ideal possible world. I find that these obligations are not likely to be overly-demanding, and so utilitarianism seems to not be inherently overly-demanding. The theory should not be rejected for a trait that is not a necessary aspect of it. Finally, I address the concept of moral wrongness under utilitarianism and its role in determining over-demandingness. I find that the binary moral rightness and wrongness distinction does not capture human attitudes toward attempts accurately, and switching to degrees of moral imperfection seems to better encapsulate that. Doing so should reduce the incentive to reject demanding obligations because this allows for someone who tries their best to be distinct from someone who actively tries their

worst. Overall, I hope to have defended utilitarianism from the demandingness objection and to have made it more palatable on these grounds.

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