Demandingness and Praiseworthiness

1. Introduction

A common objection to proposed moral obligations is that they are too demanding. This objection is commonly known as the demandingness objection. The demandingness objection claims that sometimes the action or actions required to fulfil a proposed moral obligation are too costly to the agent for the proposed obligation to be truly obligatory. The objection is most commonly brought against act consequentialist theories, especially those that aim to *maximise* the good. Maximisation is a demanding affair.

This essay doesn't respond to the most influential criticisms of the demandingness objection such as Kagan's "Does Consequentialism Demand Too Much?" (Kagan 1984) or Sobel's "The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection" (Sobel 2007). What it does do is show how the demandingness objection can motivate a praiseworthiness exception to ethical obligations.

I aim to solve the demandingness objection by developing a new account of praiseworthiness. The argument of this essay runs as follows: I first look at Dorsey's Very Strong Beneficence Principle as an example for a principle that could be seen as making excessive demands upon us (§ 2). I then show that avoiding the objection with a semantic shift is inadequate (§ 3). Next, I outline and critique McElwee's sentimental-motivational view (§ 4). While McElwee's own account falls short of solving the demandingness objection, I show that it can be adapted, resulting in my praiseworthiness account (§ 5).

2. The Objection

In his seminal paper "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", Peter Singer outlines what has since become known as the Strong Beneficence Principle (SBP): "[I]f it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it." (Singer 1972, 231) In the actual world, a rich person adopting this principle would be required to give until they reached a subsistence level. This principle could already motivate the demandingness objection, but Dorsey believes that the SBP implies an even stronger Very Strong Beneficence Principle (VSBP):

> Persons of affluent means ought to give away those means to those who might fail basic human subsistence until the point at which either a) no good can be done by doing so (i.e., the trade-off is not efficient regarding total subsistence), or b) giving more would require them to violate an independent moral principle. (Dorsey 2007, 145)

This version of the principle requires the greatest sacrifice as our obligations do not cease after we go below the level of basic human subsistence ourselves. I will assume there are no independent moral principles which may alleviate some of the demandingness (e.g. a requirement that we are required to prioritise the human subsistence of those close to us.) I will also assume – as Dorsey does – that we live in a world where giving to a point below subsistence would help more than maintaining a subsistence level and continuing to give away income. This may not be the case, but it is the case in a close possible world.

Such a demanding moral obligation, whether or not this is a fair interpretation of Singer's principle, gives us the strongest motivation for the demandingness objections. By requiring such sacrifice for strangers, it is perhaps as demanding as a semi-plausible theory might be.

The demandingness objection can be formulated as follows:

A proposed obligation requiring an agent take action A does not impose ethical demands upon the agent if taking action A is too costly to the agent.

The VSBP is incredibly costly so we can understand why someone might not follow it simply due to its cost. In fact, I'm not sure there's anyone in the world who fulfils the VSBP and very few people even fulfil the less costly SBP despite it having many advocates, due largely to the costs they both impose upon the agent. It seems more than reasonable for someone to not want to impose such large costs upon themselves. It would be martyrdom, sacrificing so much of one's own wellbeing for others. The question is whether this is relevant to the moral facts.

The demandingness objection also seems to lead to a second-order demandingness objection:

A proposed obligation is implausible if means very few or even no people meet the obligation, such that very few or even no people are good and the mast majority or even all people are bad.

It's implausible to claim that we can't call normal people good because they don't always or even often fulfil an incredibly demanding ethical principle. A plausible account must have room for calling ordinary people good.

So, what is the upshot if the demandingness objection holds? The extreme view would be to take it as a reductio ad absurdum for any overly demanding ethic. One might say, "The VSBP cannot be true as it places too great a burden on the agent to fulfil." Someone who accepted this view would have to find an amount of demandingness they see as acceptable or risk falling into defending the rich's "right to gourmet dinners" (Shue 1988, 689), which Shue called "Yuppie Ethics". The task then, would be to find a theory which isn't overly demanding while avoiding falling into yuppie ethics.

3. Not a matter of semantics

3.1 Motivating the semantic solution

It may be said that the demandingness objection is largely motivated by the objector's desire to see the actions of themselves and those they admire as morally right. As demanding principles like VSBP are met by very few or even no actual actions, we are left unable to claim that anyone meets their obligations on these theories. This makes it difficult to call these actions right.

Perhaps even more critically, we want to be able to say that people who fail to entirely meet their obligations are good, but this appears like it may be an issue of semantics rather than a true philosophical problem. We can treat both of these motivations for demandingness objections as semantic issues by relativising claims about what is and isn't a right action and who is or isn't a good person.

The desire to be able to speak this way seems irrelevant to the facts of the matter. My desire to see myself as a good student doesn't extend my essay deadlines. We might claim that this just shows a lack of moral fibre and people should simply meet their obligations if they want to be called "good", it shouldn't be easy to be good. This may have some truth, but a suspicious motivation does not mean that the objection is misplaced. We do think and talk this way in actuality and a plausible theory should accommodate this talk. It's still implausible to claim that anyone falling short of VSBP is bad.

3.2 The semantic solution and action

We might naively judge an individual's actions by how close they are to meeting their ethical obligations and being right. There is only one right action but there are many degrees of wrong action. On a consequentialist account, these degrees are determined how many fewer good and/or more bad consequences are created than by the best action.

However, there may be a way of satisfying the objection without making any compromises to our moral obligations. I shall call this the "semantic solution". We accept that the only right action is that which lines up with VSBP. To take any other action is wrong. We don't want to dilute right action so that it becomes a matter of degree. Actions must be objectively right or wrong. Then, we appeal to the concept of greater and lesser evil. Actions can fail to meet ethical principles dramatically or by a great margin.

Imagine someone who is about to take an action. Action *A* gives away all their assets to an effective charity, bringing them below subsistence level, meeting VSBP. *A* is the right thing to do. Action *B* is giving until they cannot give any more, meeting SBP but not VSBP. *B* is the wrong thing to do. Action *C* going and getting themselves a sandwich, a morally irrelevant act (or at least one without important moral consequences.) *C* is also doing the wrong thing. However, *C* is also more wrong than *B*. Similarly, action *D* of going and committing a murder is something wrong which is even more wrong than *C*.[1] This property of being more wrong can be called "worse" and the property of being less wrong, "better".

From this we can then pick a (somewhat arbitrary) point to call an action "right" even though it isn't right. A "right action" is wrong as it is not the right action, but it passes a somewhat arbitrary point where it becomes "right" but not right. This would plausibly be where it is significantly closer to the right action than the mean of all possible actions.[2]

The theory must also be sensitive to context. When we compare actions across individuals, we must also consider the options available to them. The right action is the best action available to someone. There are situations where the right action is not especially beneficent. Someone below subsistence level's right action may simply be to work to keep them and their family alive. This won't have nearly as good consequences as the

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[1] I don't intend to make a distinction between causing and allowing harm here.
[2] In the top 20% of possible actions perhaps.

billionaire who gives away a small percentage of their wealth to charity, but the billionaire acts wrongly. The billionaire is acting better than if they gave nothing, but their action is still wrong.

3.2 The semantic solution and the second-order demandingness objection

A naïve view of what makes a good person is that they simply be someone who meets their moral obligations. This view makes the problem of the second-order demandingness objection clear as the most demanding principles have little to no successful adherents. According to VSBP there are likely very few people who've even met their moral obligations once. Believers in these principles who want a plausible account of what makes a good person must take a different view.

We can instead take an average of the rightness of all actions which someone has performed to evaluate their goodness. On this understanding, while the person who follows SBP and the serial killer are both worse than follower of VSBP, we can still happily say that the person following SBP is far better than the serial killer. We can even call the follower of SBP "good" and the serial killer "bad" as the SBP follower's actions are on average far closer to right action than the killer's. This point where someone becomes good doesn't need to be precise. It's a somewhat arbitrary call, what are objective are claims about people being better or worse than one another by comparing their actions.

We must be even more sensitive to context when judging persons. When we return to the person below subsistence level and the billionaire, we find that at most points of time the billionaire has access to far more actions and many of these have very good consequences. We judge individual actions by how close they are to the right action. So similarly, we judge the person by how close their actions are to the right actions available to them.[3] The better the actions one takes from those available to them, the better the person.

This is obviously a very awkward way of talking about whether someone is ultimately good or bad. I don't think adoption of this theory should overrule common language when we call someone or some act good or

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[3] The billionaire also has access to far worse actions with all their resources. We may be tempted to claim that billionaires must be judged by against the mean of the best and worst actions available to them, but I worry that this falls into yuppie ethics as too low a bar is set for the billionaire.

bad. What this clunky way of speaking about the morality of people and their actions does, is allow us to be very precise when we need to be. It also illustrates that any action short of VSBP is objectively bad as we have failed to meet our moral obligations, but we are still able to distinguish between degrees of bad. We can then call those things that are less bad colloquially "good" without believing that they are actually good.

3.3 Summing up the Semantic Solution

Ethical demands don't have to be strong. First, there may be other non-ethical normative demands that we have to consider which conflict with our moral obligations. For instance, there may be epistemological obligations or even a duty of rational self-interest conflicting with moral obligations. Second, even if there aren't this incredibly demanding ethic of VSBP might not be putting a metaphorical gun to your head. There may be no actual consequences to not meeting it, making it simply an evaluative tool.

Ultimately, the semantic solution suffers only minor problems from its clunkiness and it does have some small appeal in allowing us to speak about good and evil, right and wrong without substantive changes. However, this debunking approach fails to grapple with the entirety of the demandingness objection. There is still the highly implausible claim that we are morally obligated to follow a demanding ethical principle like VSBP despite the likelihood being that no one has ever successfully followed VSBP for even a month.

4. McElwee's sentimental-motivational view

McElwee claims that any plausible response to the demandingness objection must start by acknowledging that "costs to the agent are *self-imposed* while costs to patients are not." (2017, 97) The best responses will "appeal to appropriate responses in our reactive attitudes—of blame and guilt—to the level of altruism and self-sacrifice an agent displays." (2017, 97) We don't blame an individual for simply acting morally suboptimally, blame is reserved for "cases of harming and cases of free-riding or non-cooperation." (2017, 98) We must also not take our initial reactions as privileged, rather, we should privilege the blame feelings we have for an action after reflection upon it.

McElwee ends up specifying the required beneficence for avoiding blameworthiness as follows:[4]

> [I]t is sufficient for avoiding blameworthiness that one makes significant sacrifices for the sake of promoting the good of others (by way of beneficent behaviour towards the distant poor, for example) which nonetheless fall short of the best that one could do. (2017, 104)

According to McElwee this would also be the extent of our moral duty, let's call it the Weak Beneficence Principle (WBP). It would be unfair to call this "Yuppie Ethics" as it still demands significant sacrifices for others' good. We can still claim that the best thing to do is adhering to VSBP, but it has been divorced from obligation, the right thing to do is just any action which meets WBP.

Working within a consequentialist framework, this theory divorces duty from a cost-benefit analysis. For example, we might imagine a variant of the classic thought experiment deployed against consequentialism of the doctor with 5 dying patients who need organ transplants and one healthy individual being morally required to kill the healthy individual and transplant their organs. In this variant the doctor asks the healthy individual for their consent in this course of action. It seems overly harsh to place any blame on the healthy patient for not sacrificing their own life. It requires too much self-sacrifice. It would be the best action, but it is not the only right action and therefore isn't obligatory.

Now imagine that only the doctor themselves is dying and the doctor will go on to save four people over their life. It doesn't seem harsh to blame the doctor if they harvested the healthy patient's organs without consent. The act harms another and seems selfish even if the consequences are good. We seem to weigh harm as more blameworthy than simple inaction.

So, the patient has no obligations either way, as neither action would be blameworthy. However, we may still acknowledge that sacrificing themselves would have better consequences and therefore be the best action. The doctor, on the other hand, has an obligation not to harvest the organs, as this would be blameworthy.

However, as McElwee acknowledges and accepts, this leaves moral obligations at the mercy of the changing and arguably arbitrary category of

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[4] There are of course other attempts to accept the demandingness objection and amend consequentialist theories such as Murphy (1993) and Scheffler (1994).

"blameworthy" which people decide upon. He sees this as a positive, writing "in order to be plausible, an account of moral demands cannot stretch too far from typical human motivations." (McElwee 2017, 103)

But this means that in a possible world with amoral people, there would be no ethical obligations. Even worse, we can conceive of a world with an incredibly warped sense of morality, let's imagine the only thing they find blameworthy is passing up an opportunity for murder. If we also imagine that a form of consequentialism which justifies the doctor killing the healthy patient for their organs is true, we find that the doctor has a moral obligation to do this in this world. However, people in this possible world have no obligation to perform any act that does not involve murder, these would either be supererogatory or morally impermissible.

An account without supererogation also seems very harsh on the follower of VSBP, to say that all this individual has done is met their moral obligations is counter intuitive. They've performed a Herculean feat of willpower and self-sacrifice for the good of their fellow man. We should look for a different account which also accommodates the fact that costs to the agent are self imposed.

5. Praiseworthiness rather than Blameworthiness

McElwee believes that we can have a moral obligation only if failing to meet this obligation is blameworthy. I believe that if an action is praiseworthy it is supererogatory. These positions turn out similar results but are incompatible.

This fits Montague's definition of "agent supererogationism" (Montague, 1989, 105) which states that x is supererogatory iff it is praiseworthy for an agent to do x and it is not obligatory. Unlike Montague, I believe that the lack of obligatoriness is baked into it being praiseworthy to do x. Meeting one's obligations does not deserve praise, it is simply to be expected. When someone does their duty, this is the bare minimum to not be considered in a greater or lesser sense bad. Moral duties are like occupational duties, they are a requirement of being a moral agent as occupational duties are a requirement of performing a certain job. This intuition seem like a bit of a stretch, but it leads to a very plausible account.

Like McElwee, I believe that failing to meet an obligation is blameworthy. Unlike McElwee, I believe that being an obligation makes failure to fulfil it blameworthy rather than blameworthiness creating an obligation. This

means that we avoid basing our moral obligations on what moral agents in a possible world consider to be blameworthy. So, if we accept VSBP, that is what generates obligations rather than blameworthiness itself as McElwee holds. Praiseworthiness can only rule out an obligation, not make one.

However, we do exclude moral obligations from the domain of obligations based on what moral agents consider to be praiseworthy. So, what is it to be praiseworthy? It seems inextricably linked to self-sacrifice or otherwise put, the agent placing large demands upon themselves. Let's look at some examples:

1. Someone following SBP gives money to charity until they reach subsistence level. We consider this act of giving praiseworthy as they sacrificed their own wellbeing to improve the wellbeing of others.
2. Someone risks their own life to save a drowning child, thereby getting wet, but as they're a strong swimmer they're not at much risk themselves.

It seems that (1) is clearly praiseworthy as this is a very large self-sacrifice that produces a great amount of good. (2) on the other hand, seems obligatory as although saving a drowning child is very good, there isn't much self-sacrifice.

The solution to this problem is also uncomfortable. If we wish to avoid awkward counterexamples across possible worlds, we must pin our concept of praiseworthiness down. The only way of doing this which doesn't appear arbitrary is to consider any act which would otherwise be obligatory that involves self-sacrifice to be praiseworthy and therefore supererogatory. Any time that an agent takes a right action that isn't beneficial or at least neutral to their own interests they act in a supererogatory way. So, (2) is in fact praiseworthy and therefore supererogatory.

This puts the bar for supererogation very low leaving very little room for moral obligation. Someone who does any good thing which inconveniences them is doing something supererogatory. This could stretch to thanking people when they do something kind for you. We seem to have fallen to Shue's Yuppie Ethics.

However, this is only what is obligatory, and moral obligations being easily fulfilled seems intuitive. People don't have to say thank you to avoid being

considered bad. So, if there was only duty, we would have fallen to Yuppie Ethics. However, supererogation gives us the ability to commend those who go beyond obligation. It is still better for the rich to give to charity, we just can't say that they've failed to meet an obligation or blame them if they don't. Just because most morality doesn't oblige us, doesn't mean that it isn't best for us to do supererogatory acts.

The second-order demandingness objection provides us with another strong reason for preferring the praiseworthiness-based account over the semantic solution. The praiseworthiness account allows us to better accommodate worries about the goodness of people on demanding accounts of ethics brought up in §2. We can measure individual's goodness by the quantity and quality of their supererogatory acts and their badness by how often they have failed to meet their obligations.

The praiseworthiness account is a somewhat unsatisfactory answer to the demandingness objection but not entirely fruitless. If we don't accept it, we must instead accept some degree of relativism in our obligations unless we can reject the concept of possible worlds. Even then we may run into problems with what other cultures find praiseworthy or what was found praiseworthy in the past and will be in the future.

6. Conclusion

I have outlined the demandingness objections, motivating as strongly as possible with Dorsey's VSBP in §2. In §3, I discussed and rejected a semantic solution, which understood the moral obligations of the VSBP as absolute, while allowing that we are still able to describe people colloquially as good by comparing them to their peers. In §4, I looked at what a supporter of the objection, McElwee, saw as the upshot of the objection, an account of moral obligation which considered blameworthiness necessary for creating an obligation. After making some objections I moved to the positive part of this paper. In §6 outlined my own praiseworthiness-based solution to the demandingness objection. I justified this with a second-order demandingness objection and appeal to examples. I demonstrated that McElwee's problems with relativism could be solved in a non-arbitrary way by the praiseworthiness account. Finally, I showed that it wasn't as worrying for morality to be so undemanding as it may first seem.

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