

Unreasonably Difficult Demands

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1. Introduction

It's sometimes said that (maximising act-) consequentialism is too demanding.¹ Suppose Ann can donate her kidney to save Ben's life. Consequentialism suggests that, so long as by donating Ann brings about the best consequence, she is required to do so. Surely, the sceptics say, morality can't be *that demanding*.

Consequentialists have responded to this objection in various ways. On the one hand, they insist consequentialism doesn't in fact demand that much. Some put forward less demanding versions of consequentialism, such as rule and satisficing consequentialism.² Others make the case that pretty much doing what most people are doing will bring about the best consequence.³ On the other hand, some consequentialists bite the bullet and accept that morality is indeed very demanding. Some bolster this response by emphasising the fact that the demandingness objection is poorly motivated ("why assume that morality isn't demanding?").⁴ Some point out that the demandingness objection is in tension with other positions held by non-consequentialists, and therefore non-consequentialism is incoherent.⁵ Still, some attempt to explain away the force of

¹ Unless otherwise noted, I will use "consequentialism" to mean "maximising act-consequentialism."

² Brandt (1959, 1967), Harsanyi (1977), Rawls (1955), and Slote & Pettit (1984).

³ Pettit (1997).

⁴ Singer (1972).

⁵ Kagan (1982).

the demandingness objection with a general scepticism towards intuitions (i.e., they “psychologise” intuitions).⁶

In this paper, I focus on a third type of response, which holds that the demandingness objection is ill-conceived. In particular, I examine the argument put forward by David Sobel in “the Impotence of the Demandingness Objection.”⁷ In Section 2, I lay out Sobel’s argument and clarify its force. I then examine and reject a response to Sobel (Section 3), before defending a different response (Section 4 & 5).

I will defend three claims: first, whether the demandingness objection is impotent depends on how “impotence” is interpreted; second, the demandingness objection should be understood as an objection that derives its force from a plausible intuition, and so construed, the objection is forceful (I will say more about forcefulness and impotence in Section 2); third, we can justify the intuition, on which the demandingness objection rests, by conceptualising moral demands as motivational difficulty.

2. What is impotent about the demandingness objection?

The demandingness objection to consequentialism can be understood as follows.

PREMISE 1. Any plausible moral theory cannot be too demanding. If a moral theory is too demanding, that give us a reason to reject it.

PREMISE 2. Consequentialism is too demanding.

CONCLUSION. We have a reason to reject consequentialism.⁸

To make the case for PREMISE 2, one might posit

⁶ Singer (2007).

⁷ Sobel (2007).

⁸ There can be different versions of this objection, depending on how we understand its force. In the extreme, one could argue the fact that a theory is too demanding is a decisive reason against the theory. I adopt a more neutral formulation here.

PREMISE (a). A moral theory is too demanding if it requires Ann to sacrifice her kidney to save Ben’s life.

PREMISE (b). Consequentialism requires Ann to sacrifice her kidney to save Ben’s life.

Therefore, consequentialism is too demanding.

Sobel’s argument that the demandingness objection is impotent focuses on PREMISE (a). He notes that in this case, Ben has more to lose than Ann: if a moral theory doesn’t *require* Ann to sacrifice her kidney, it would *permit* Ben to die. If we focus on the *costs to each individual alone*, we would have to conclude that a moral theory that doesn’t require Ann to sacrifice her kidney would be even more demanding for Ben. This is because the cost to Ben (i.e., life) is higher than that to Ann (i.e., a kidney). Plausibly, it would be unacceptable if a moral theory is “too demanding” whether or not it requires Ann to sacrifice her kidney. Thus it’s also true that if the cost to Ben is higher than that to Ann, PREMISE (a) must be rejected. A moral theory might not be too demanding even if it requires Ann to sacrifice her kidney after all.

Sobel suggests that to reject this result those who make the demandingness objection need the following distinction:

DISTINCTION. In assessing how demanding a moral theory is, what it requires of a helper counts more than what it permits the aided to bear.

In other words, we need to draw a distinction between the costs that a moral theory requires us to take on (“*required costs*”) and those that a moral theory permits to befall us (“*costs permitted*”). We must hold that the cost to Ann counts more than the cost to Ben because the former is required by morality while the latter is merely permitted.

According to Sobel, the problem is that

The moral significance of the distinction between costs a moral theory requires and costs it permits must already be in place before the Objection gets a grip. But this is for the decisive break

with Consequentialism to have already happened before we feel the pull of the Objection⁹. The conclusion is not merely that the Objection has as an upshot that costs required by a moral theory are more demanding than costs permitted [...]. Arguably any argument against Consequentialism would need to have such an upshot. Rather, the thought here is that the Objection needs to presuppose the moral significance of such distinctions as a premise in reaching the conclusion that Consequentialism is problematically demanding. The Objection does not help justify such a premise. This is why we should reject Consequentialism independently of the Objection or not at all.¹⁰

Put it differently: to reach PREMISE (a), we need to presuppose DISTINCTION, but once we presuppose DISTINCTION, we already presuppose that consequentialism is false. Therefore, the demandingness objection, for which PREMISE (a) is needed, is “impotent”, because we should reject consequentialism independently of it or not at all.

Now, we can classify any objection to a theory into two categories. For one, there are *internal objections* – these are objections that do not rely on further claims rejected by the theory they critique. Here is an example: it’s argued that there are cases – the so-called “no-difference cases” – where individual acts, despite being intuitively impermissible, do not seem to make a difference to the overall consequence; consequentialism, therefore, might struggle to account for these cases.¹¹ Notice that this objection is made within a consequentialist framework, as it shares the consequentialist assumption that what matters for the permissibility of an act is only its consequences. The objection here is that, even with this assumption, consequentialism has difficulty making sense of certain intuitively impermissible acts.

9 Sobel (2007), p. 3

10 Sobel (2007), p 3-4.

11 See, for example, Sinnott-Armstrong (2005), Kagan (2011), Nefsky (2011).

There are also *external objections*, of which the demandingness objection is one, that do rely on claims that are not shared by the theory they critique. Sobel’s argument, then, is that all external objections are impotent. It helps to illustrate this point with a different external objection. Some people object to consequentialism with this well-known case, *Footbridge*: a runaway trolley is about to kill five people, and you can save these five by pushing an innocent person from the footbridge, causing his death.¹² Non-consequentialists argue:

*PREMISE (a)**. Any plausible moral theory cannot imply that it is permissible for you to push the person in Footbridge. If a moral theory does imply this, that gives us a reason to reject the theory.
*PREMISE (b)**. Consequentialism implies that it is permissible for you to push the person in Footbridge.
CONCLUSION. We have a reason to reject consequentialism.

Let us call this the “permissiveness objection” to consequentialism. Now, we could make a similar charge of “impotence” by pointing out that PREMISE (a)* relies on

*DISTINCTION**. To determine whether an individual is permitted to ϕ to bring about some good at a certain cost, it matters how the good is brought about (either in terms of the causal relations between the good and the cost, or whether the agent intends the cost as a means to the good).¹³

The reason is that non-consequentialists need to distinguish *Footbridge* from a different case, *Side Track*. In this case, a runaway trolley is about to kill five people, and you can save these five by redirecting the trolley to a different track, killing another innocent person. Non-consequentialists would hold that any plausible moral theory must imply that it is permissible for you to redirect the

12 Thomson (1985).

13 How to justify DISTINCTION* is a major area of dispute among non-consequentialists. For two prominent opposing views, see Kamm (2008, chapter 5) and Tadros (2011, chapter 6&7).

trolley in *Side Track*. As such, DISTINCTION is needed to preserve PREMISE (a)*

PREMISE (a)* requires non-consequentialists to embrace DISTINCTION*. One might then argue the permissiveness objection is also impotent: in order for the permissiveness objection to get a grip, we must presuppose DISTINCTION*; but this is for the decisive break with Consequentialism to have already happened before we feel the pull of the permissiveness objection; as such, we should reject consequentialism independently of the permissiveness objection or not at all.

So, if Sobel is right that the demandingness objection – which is often used to motivate agent-centred options – is impotent, we should also conclude that the permissiveness objection, often used to motivate agent-centred constraints, is also impotent. Perhaps, consequentialists should rejoice at this implication; perhaps, we should all be consequentialists after all.

Now, we should ask what exactly is meant when we say external objections are impotent. Sobel seems to have in mind the view that

If a theory T has an implication I, the objection O that I is counter-intuitive is impotent just in case O relies on a further claim C which is incompatible with T.

For instance, given that consequentialism (T) implies that Ann is required to sacrifice her kidney (I), the demandingness objection (O) is impotent because it relies on DISTINCTION* which consequentialists reject. The demandingness objection and the permissiveness objection are impotent because on their own they have no force against T though they follow from DISTINCTION and DISTINCTION* which, if true, would have force against T; we can put this point more precisely:

INDEPENDENCE: To say that an objection O to a theory T is impotent is to say that we could reject T on the basis of claim C

(if true) without relying on O though O derives from C.

Now, I think Sobel could be right that if we interpret the charge of “impotence” as INDEPENDENCE, all external objections are impotent. But that is hardly a surprising result! By definition, external objections rely on a further claim that, if justified, is itself sufficient to amount a challenge to the theory.

We should not confuse the charge of “impotence” with lack of *force* construed as:

FORCEFULNESS: To say an objection O to a theory T is *forceful* is to say that O gives (considerable or sufficient) reason to reject T.

External objections, such as the demandingness objection and the permissiveness objection, can have *force*. These objections derive their force, I maintain, from plausible *intuitions*. The force of the demandingness objection is the thought that, *intuitively*, it would be too demanding and therefore unacceptable if Ann is required to sacrifice her kidney. Similarly, the force of the permissiveness objection is the thought that, *intuitively*, it would be unacceptable if you are permitted to push the person in *Footbridge*. Note that this doesn’t mean these intuitions do not require further justifications. Non-consequentialists only need to maintain that their intuitive force is independent of the force of their justification and that we have some reason to reject consequentialism on this basis even before we offer a justification for the intuition. These intuitions have some *force prior* to justification.¹⁴

The crucial point here is that I think Sobel misrepresents the role intuition can play in the demandingness objection. Sobel thinks intuition carries

¹⁴ Nor need they claim the intuitions are *self-justified*. Tedesco ascribes this view to non-consequentialists and then proceeds to try to refute it (Tedesco (2011)). I don’t think non-consequentialists need to rest their case on intuitions being self-justified (which is implausible). They only need to maintain that the intuitive force is independent of the force of its justification, and we have some reason to reject consequentialism on this basis even before we offer a justification for the intuition.

no weight and it provides no reason to reject a theory, as all the weight is carried by the idea the agent's costs have precedence over the patient's. Against this I want to contend powerful intuitions like these carry much weight, they give us reasons to reject, or suspect, consequentialism for instance, even before we have a rationale. In other words, the force of the demandingness objection is derived from the plausibility of our intuitions.

We can grasp this point from a different angle. Sometimes, after we have defended a claim C which, if true, is sufficient for rejecting a theory T, we go on to argue that a further claim C+ follows from C, and C+ is itself intuitively plausible. The reason we do this, I propose, is that we would have more reason to reject T with C and C+ than with C alone. This is because with C alone, the reason we have for rejecting T depends solely the plausibility of our defence for C, while with C and C+ we have an additional reason, reason derived from the intuitive plausibility of C+, for rejecting T. So even if we already have a defence D for the distinction between required costs and costs permitted, it still matters that it's intuitively implausible that Ann is required to donate her kidney. With this intuitive claim, the reason for rejecting consequentialism now depends on both the plausibility of D and the plausibility of the intuition.¹⁵

Here is the upshot: Sobel is right that *in order for PREMISE (a) to be true, DISTINCTION must be true*, but that does not mean that intuition, on its

15 It might be said that my argument would justify arbitrary intuitions. If someone has the intuition that interracial marriage is impermissible, presumably we would not want to say that intuition gives them a reason to object to interracial marriage. Now I am happy to grant that having this intuition gives the person some reason to object to interracial marriage if that intuition meets certain other conditions (for example, if you are a coherentist, that intuition must cohere with other things that the person believes). Very often I suspect that people who hold morally objectionable intuitions cannot meet these conditions. Even if some morally objectionable intuitions survive this filtering process, if there are other, stronger reasons to reject these intuitions – as there presumably would be in cases like interracial marriage – then these intuitions should be abandoned. For a similar point on how we approach morally objectionable intuitions, see Kagan (2016), p. 8. I thank the editor of this journal for the objection.

own, is otiose. The demandingness objection and the permissiveness objection give us some independent reasons to reject consequentialism – even though we could as well reject consequentialism on the basis of DISTINCTION and DISTINCTION* (if they are justified). The demandingness objection is *forceful*.

3. Moral demands as costs

I've argued that regardless of whether the demandingness objection is impotent, it is forceful. Still, we would want a justification for the intuition that the objection rests on – namely, we would want to justify the distinction between required costs and costs permitted. In this section, I look at Fiona Woollard's proposed justification and explain why it is inadequate.

Woollard's claim is that only required costs count as moral demands, and as such, only required costs are relevant to the demandingness objection.¹⁶ Her reasoning is as follows. First, she posits that a moral theory is too demanding just in case, for the most part, we cannot expect a reasonable agent conform to the theory.¹⁷ By a "reasonable agent", Woollard has in mind someone who "[lies] somewhere between saints and sinners", "[is] not totally self-absorbed", and "[has] a reasonable concern to act morally."¹⁸ If, in the majority of cases, even a reasonable agent cannot be expected to conform to a moral theory, the theory is too demanding.

Woollard then notes that, compared to the costs permitted, required costs

16 So, in this sense, Woollard is arguing for a stronger claim than DISTINCTION. DISTINCTION says that, compared to what a moral theory permits to happen, what the theory requires *counts more* towards its moral demands on an agent. Namely, required costs count more towards moral demands than costs permitted. Woollard, by contrast, holds that costs permitted *do not count* as moral demands at all. (Because costs permitted do not count at all, it is of course true that required costs count more.)

17 Woollard (2016): 96-97. Woollard's account follows the tradition of many others in a link between "moral demands" and "what a reasonable agent would do" See Herman (1993), Hill (2002), Miller (2004), Noggle (2009), Stohr (2011), and Schmidt (2017).

18 Woollard (2016), p. 96.

are distinctive because they are costs that “[the agent] has the opportunity to avoid, but only by failing to conform to the relevant moral demand”¹⁹ As such, only required costs give rise to a choice between “accepting the cost and failing to conform to the moral demand.”²⁰ In other words, only when an agent faces required costs does she have to decide whether to conform to a moral theory.

That means whether a moral theory is too demanding hangs on whether we can expect a reasonable agent to conform to the theory, and whether we can expect a reasonable agent to conform to the theory hangs on required costs. Therefore, only required costs count as moral demands, and only required costs are relevant to the demandingness objection.

As I see it, the problem of Woollard’s analysis is this: she assumes without argument that whether a moral theory is too demanding hangs on whether we can expect a reasonable agent to conform to the theory. She says,

An underlying concern of the demandingness objection is the worry that some theories or principles ask so much of the agent that it is not reasonable to expect an agent to choose to conform to the moral principle. Behind this lies the thought that morality should be such that it is generally reasonable to expect an agent to choose to conform to it.²¹

One might ask: why should the demandingness objection be concerned with *whether it is reasonable to expect someone to choose to conform to a moral theory*? More specifically, one might instead posit that the demandingness objection should be concerned with *whether it is reasonable to expect someone to accept a moral theory when the theory permits some costs to befall her*. In other words, it is true that *if* the demandingness objection is concerned with whether it is reasonable to expect someone to choose to conform to a moral

19 Woollard (2016), p. 94.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

theory, only the required costs count as moral demands. But we need a justification for the antecedent – we want to know *why* the demandingness objection should be understood in this way. This is because, if the demandingness objection is instead concerned with whether it is reasonable to expect someone to accept a moral theory when the theory permits some costs to befall her, we would get the result that only costs permitted count as moral demands.

The upshot is this: Woollard correctly identifies what is distinctive about required costs – that they are concerned with whether it is reasonable to expect someone to choose to conform to a moral theory; what she fails to do is to justify why we should focus on what is distinctive about required costs instead of, say, what is distinctive about costs permitted. Woollard’s analysis relies on privileging the perspective of the moral agents at the expense of moral patients, in that we must treat only what’s distinctive about the moral agents as relevant to moral demands, as opposed to what’s distinctive about the moral patients (faced with a choice regarding whether to accept the moral theory). As such, Woollard’s justification for DISTINCTION is inadequate.

4. Moral demands as difficulty

In Section 3, I identified the problem with Woollard’s justification for DISTINCTION.²² In this section, I make the case that we can justify DISTINCTION by conceptualising moral demands as motivational difficulty.

Here is the central claim: *a moral theory is too demanding just in case it requires the agent to do things (or to refrain from doing things) that are unreasonably difficult to do (to refrain from doing).*²³ The difficulty I have in

22 In fact, I suspect that so long as we conceptualise moral demands as costs, we will struggle justify DISTINCTION without begging the question (though I do not have an argument for this stronger claim).

23 McElwee (2015, 2016), Chappell (2019), Lippert-Rasmussen (2019).

mind here is motivational difficulty, which in turn can be analysed as *the likelihood of success conditional on trying*. Roughly, the difficulty of φ -ing is measured by how likely it is that an agent succeeds in φ -ing if she tries (and does not give up trying) to φ .²⁴ φ_i -ing is more motivationally difficult than φ_j -ing just in case, if the agent tries (and does not give up trying) to φ_i and to φ_j , she is more likely to succeed in φ_i -ing.

Conceptualising moral demands as motivational difficulty helps justify the distinction between required costs and costs permitted. The question of motivational difficulty only arises when a moral theory requires an agent to do something at a certain cost. In other words, required costs are related to motivational difficulty in a way that costs permitted are not: the higher the required costs of φ -ing, the more motivational difficulty it is to φ . For this reason, only required costs are relevant to moral demands.²⁵

Now, one might raise an objection, similar to the one I raised against Woollard's analysis: why should we think that the demandingness objection is concerned with motivational difficulty? Am I not also assuming what needs to be argued for?

I think we can offer a rationale for why the demandingness objection should be concerned with motivational difficulty. Any plausible moral theory, it seems, must recognise the *limitations on human motivational capacity*. The underlying point is that *morality is for beings like us* – beings whose motivational capacity is limited. Just as it would be unreasonable to require someone to rescue a drowning child from a dangerous swimming pool if she cannot swim ("ought implies can"), it would be unreasonable to require

²⁴ This analysis of motivational difficulty is borrowed from Southwood (2016).

²⁵ I say "only required costs are *relevant* to moral demands" instead of "only required costs *count* as moral demands" because, under my conception, it is motivational difficulty that counts as moral demands.

someone to donate her kidney if doing so is unreasonably difficult ("ought implies can will").²⁶

I concede that, to justify my claim that an agent is not required to φ if φ -ing is unreasonably difficult, a lot more needs to be said. I will restrict myself to making one further remark. I pointed out that Woollard's analysis relies on assuming that the demandingness objection is concerned with whether it is reasonable to expect someone to choose to conform to a moral theory. This is problematic because one might similarly posit the demandingness objection as being concerned with whether it is reasonable to expect someone to accept a moral theory when the theory permits some costs to befall her. The latter construal would get us the result that only costs permitted count as moral demands.

Now, notice that a similar objection cannot be made against my argument. My claim is that the demandingness objection is concerned with whether doing something at a certain cost is unreasonably difficult, and I said that we should justify this with reference to the limitations on human motivational capacity. Here, an objector might posit instead that the demandingness objection should be concerned with whether it would be unreasonably difficult for someone to accept that morality permits a cost to befall her.

My response is two-fold. In one sense, there is no fact of the matter as to whether it would be unreasonably difficult for someone to accept that morality permits a cost to befall her – there is no question as to whether it would be unreasonably difficult for Ben to accept that morality permits Ann not to save him. This is because morality doesn't ask Ben to *do* anything.

However, there is another sense in which the question of unreasonable

²⁶ Cf. Estlund (2011).

difficulty does arise. Although morality doesn't ask Ben to do anything, it does presumably ask Ben to *refrain from taking* Ann's kidney. So, there is indeed a question as to whether, for Ben, refraining from taking Ann's kidney is unreasonably difficult – if it is, then although Ann is not required to sacrifice her kidney voluntarily, Ben is not required to refrain from taking it either and he is therefore permitted to impose the cost on Ann.

Now, I think this is a very interesting (if somewhat surprising) implication. I do not know if refraining from taking someone else's kidney when one is dying is indeed unreasonably difficult; I do not want to take a stand on this point. Nevertheless, there are more clear-cut cases. Suppose, as I think is plausible, that it would be unreasonably difficult for wealthy citizens in developed countries to donate a large portion of their income to charities, especially when very few others are doing the same.²⁷ My account then suggests that these wealthy citizens are not required to donate a large sum of their money voluntarily. But, as is also plausible, if it would be unreasonably difficult for those in dire need to refrain from taking the resources from these wealthy citizens, refraining from taking the resources from these wealthy individuals is also not required. Therefore, although wealthy citizens in developed countries might not be required to donate, it would be permissible for those in dire needs to forcibly take their money away.²⁸

In sum, unlike Woollard's argument, the account that I develop here does

27 Cf. MacAskill, Mogensen, and Ord (2018).

28 Of course, it's not the case it would be unreasonably difficult for wealthy citizens in developed countries to donate *any* amount of money, and as such, donating a certain amount voluntarily is still required. In addition, it is *not always* permissible for those in dire needs to forcibly take money from the wealthy, even when refraining from doing so is unreasonably difficult. Plausibly, the means employed must be *proportional*, and if forcibly taking resources from the wealthy infringes on other rights of theirs (such as the right to physical safety), that is something which counts against doing it. For further discussion see Nagel (1975) p. 145.

not problematically beg the question. For one, we can justify why the demandingness objection should be concerned with motivational difficulty. I pointed out that, plausibly, morality should recognise the limitations on human motivational capacity. For another, my analysis does not privilege the perspective of the moral agents over that of the moral patients. In one sense, a moral theory doesn't ask the moral patients to do anything, so there is no question as to whether accepting the theory is unreasonably difficult. In another sense, a moral theory does ask the moral patients to refrain from doing something, which might as well be unreasonably difficult.²⁹ My account allows us to accommodate this: if refraining from doing something is unreasonably difficult, an individual is not required to do so.

5. Clarifications

I've argued that conceptualising moral demands as motivational difficulty helps justify the demandingness objection. In this section, I make two further clarifications.

Sobel briefly discusses and dismisses the idea that we should conceptualise moral demands as motivational difficulty. He says,

[A] significant reason it is difficult to comply with a morality that requires large costs of us as agents is that we assume such a moral theory will result in a situation that is much worse for us, our loved ones, or our projects. But this needs not be so. For we might be asked to bear large costs as agents yet receive large benefits as patients. Depending on the size and kind of benefits, it would be

29 Here though, it might be said that "moral patients" in one context are just as "moral agents" in another context. So, regarding whether it would be unreasonably difficult for Ben to accept that morality permits Ann not to sacrifice her kidney, Ben is a moral patient; regarding whether it would be unreasonably difficult for Ben to refrain from taking Ann's kidney, Ben is a moral agent. That's why there is no conflict between saying that in one sense, the question of motivational difficulty doesn't arise for Ben, while in another sense, the question does arise.

odd to call such a moral theory excessively demanding.³⁰

The thought is that, plausibly, we would all fare better under consequentialism – although we would be asked to make (significant) sacrifices more often, we would also be recipients of (significant) benefits more often. If we all fare better under consequentialism, it then seems odd to object to consequentialism as being too demanding.³¹ The underlying point is this: we often find doing certain things difficult because we are mistaken about how we will be impacted; if only we could remember consequentialism will make us all better off, we would not find making large sacrifices difficult.

This objection, however, neglects the fact that motivating ourselves to do certain things can be difficult, even when we know that these things are beneficial to us.³² I might know that eating healthy is beneficial, but that hardly means sticking to a healthy diet cannot be motivationally difficult. It's true that reminding ourselves of the benefits we will receive often makes it easier to do certain things, but we should not overstate this point. It is plausible that donating one's kidney to save a stranger is very difficult – perhaps unreasonably so – no matter how many times we are gently reminded we will all be better off in the long term.

Unlike Sobel, Marcel van Ackeren recognises that doing beneficial things can be difficult, and yet, he maintains that we should not conceptualise moral demands as motivational difficulty. He writes,

Suppose that Josh is morally required to help Jim move to another town – let us say because Jim has already helped Josh move and also because they are good friends. Suppose Josh likes to do

³⁰ Sobel (2007), p. 10.

³¹ The argument that most people will fare better is often used as an argument for accepting consequentialism. See Harsanyi (1955, 1977). See also, Hare (2013, 2016).

³² Van Ackeren (2018): 319-20.

weight training but, due to the commitment of helping, it seems that he will miss one training session in the gym. But Jim has many boxes filled with books so that Josh will be able to have a proper training session and profit from the consequences of exercising while helping his friend. The action will have extra non-moral value.

Now, what if Josh all of a sudden finds it difficult to motivate himself to do the extra training in the form of lifting Jim's boxes although he will enjoy this exercise, and he also realizes the good long-term consequences. But does it make sense to say that this difficulty increases the demandingness of the moral obligation to help his friend?³³

The last rhetorical question is meant to illustrate that only costs, and not difficulty, count as moral demands – even if Josh “all of a sudden finds it difficult to motivate himself”, this doesn't seem to make what morality asks him to do more demanding.

Now, notice my claim that one is not required to φ if φ -ing is unreasonably difficult – what matters is not just how difficult one in fact finds φ -ing to be; there is also a *reasonableness* constraint. That is to say, Josh might in fact all of a sudden find helping his friend difficult, but plausibly that would not be reasonable. More generally, I think van Ackeren's analysis reveals a (common) misunderstanding of what it means to conceptualise moral demands as motivational difficulty. The suggestion I am making is not that we should understand the demandingness of φ -ing is in terms of, *as a matter of fact*, the motivational difficulty for a *particular* agent to φ . Instead, the claim is that the demandingness of φ -ing should be understood as how motivationally difficult φ -ing *would* be for a *reasonable* agent – agent who shares a reasonable concern for the well-being of others.³⁴ That is to say, if even a reasonable agent would find φ -ing sufficiently difficult, φ -ing is not required. If, on the other hand, a

³³ Van Ackeren (2018): 325.

particular agent in fact finds q -ing sufficiently difficult due to some unreasonable idiosyncrasies, q -ing is required all the same.

To illustrate this point, imagine a variation of van Ackeren's case. Suppose the reason Josh "all of a sudden finds it difficult to motivate himself" is that he discovered his grandmother just passed away. It then seems perfectly plausible that the moral demand on Josh has in fact increased, and this is despite the fact that the cost to him remains the same.³⁵ Under my account, an explanation is readily available: unlike the original case, the increase in motivational difficulty is now reasonable – in that even a reasonable agent would find it more difficult to help others after the death of a loved one – and that's why the moral demand on Josh has increased.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I've argued that the demandingness objection, understood as an intuitive objection, is forceful. I've also argued that we can justify the intuition on which the objection is based by conceptualising moral demands as motivational difficulty. Whether the objection is "impotent", on the other hand, depends on how the charge of impotence is interpreted. At the very least, *pace* Sobel, the fact that consequentialism generates unreasonably difficult demands gives us a reason not to be consequentialists yet.

Acknowledgements

34 Now, the notion of a "reasonable agent" needs to be unpacked, though I have no space to do so here. It should be noted that many non-consequentialist theories already have to rely on the notion of a "reasonable agent", so my account here does not introduce any unique problems. See note 16.

35 One might object that the cost to Josh has also increased – in particular, there is a further psychological cost as Josh now has to bring himself to help others while dealing with grief. More generally, one might argue that *overcoming motivational difficulty is itself a cost*. I do not have the space to adequately deal with this objection in this paper, but I will note that even if motivational difficulty is itself a cost, it is at least very different from other kinds of costs.

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