

The Demandingness Objection

Utilitarianism doesn't ask us to be morally perfect. It asks us to face up to our moral limitations and do as much as we humanly can to overcome them.

- Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes*, p. 284

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The Demandingness Objection

Many critics argue that utilitarianism is too *demanding*, because it requires us to always act such as to bring about the best outcome. The theory leaves no room for actions that are permissible yet do not bring about the best consequences. Philosophers label such actions that are morally good but not required as *supererogatory*; maximizing utilitarianism (like maximizing consequentialism more broadly) denies that any action can be supererogatory. As a result, some critics claim that utilitarianism is a morality only for saints.¹

Very few people, including utilitarian philosophers, live their life in perfect accordance with utilitarianism. For instance, consider that the money a person spends on dining out could pay for several bednets, each protecting two children in a low-income country from malaria for about two years.² From a utilitarian perspective, the benefit to the person from dining out is much smaller than the benefit to the children from not having malaria, so it would seem the person has acted wrongly in choosing to have a meal out. Analogous reasoning applies to how we use our time: the hours someone spends on social media should apparently be spent volunteering for a charity, or working harder at one's job to earn more money to donate.

To many people, these extreme obligations of utilitarianism seem absurd at first glance. According to commonsense morality, we are permitted to spend most of our income on ourselves, our loved

ones, and on our personal projects. Charity, by commonsense lights, is good and praiseworthy, but not obligatory.

Proponents of utilitarianism might [respond to this objection in four ways](#). We will go through them in turn.

Accommodating the Intuition

One way to soften the demands from utilitarianism is to argue that morality should consider human psychological limitations, such as our weakness of will. Utilitarianism recognizes that we cannot work all the time to help others without burning out, which would lead to us doing less overall good in the long run. Similarly, we need to spend money on ourselves to stay reasonably happy and healthy to sustain our long-term motivation to do good.

In addition, it is often justified for utilitarians to spend money or time to accommodate the expectations and needs of other people. If utilitarianism is associated with extreme self-sacrifice, others may not want to join utilitarian causes. Likewise, it may sometimes be justified on utilitarian grounds to buy expensive dinners if that allows one to have valuable meetings with non-utilitarians who would not want to self-sacrifice.

However, even if we accept that spending resources on ourselves can be of great instrumental importance for us to be able to benefit others, most of us must admit that we could be doing more. Utilitarianism remains a demanding ethical theory in practice, even when we account for the psychology of ourselves and others.

A more robust accommodation may be secured by rejecting the ordinary notion of moral “requirement”. As [explained in an earlier chapter](#):

Utilitarians agree that you *ideally* ought to choose whatever action would best promote overall well-being. That’s what you have the *most* moral reason to do. But they do not recommend *blaming* you every time you fall short of this ideal. As a result, many utilitarians consider it misleading to take their claims about what *ideally ought* to be done as providing an account of moral “rightness” or “obligation” in the ordinary sense.

According to utilitarianism, whether someone should be blamed for their actions is itself something to be decided by the consequences that blaming them would have. Blaming people whenever they fail to do the most good will likely have bad consequences, because it discourages people from even trying. Instead, utilitarianism will generally recommend praising people who take steps in the right direction, even if they fall short of the utilitarian ideal. This shows how the utilitarian notion of “wrongness” comes apart from the commonsense understanding of “wrongness”, which is much more tied to blameworthiness.

Indeed, on a [scalar or satisficing](#) version of utilitarianism, doing less than the best need not be considered “wrong” at all. It is simply less than would be ideal. Satisficing utilitarianism identifies

some lower minimum threshold for what is “required” to avoid blameworthiness, whereas scalar consequentialism eschews such thresholds entirely, instead assessing the moral quality of actions on a continuous scale from better to worse. It is *better* for an affluent person to donate 10% of their income to charity than to donate only 1%, which itself is better than donating nothing at all.

Debunking the Intuition

The second line of response is to argue that ordinary demandingness intuitions *presuppose* (rather than independently *support*) non-consequentialism. By asking the comparatively wealthy to do a lot to help the less fortunate, utilitarianism imposes some non-trivial costs on the wealthy. But compare this to the harms endured by the less fortunate by the wealthy doing less (or nothing) to help them. These harms vastly exceed the costs that utilitarianism would impose on the wealthy. Utilitarians may thus argue that it is the *non-utilitarian* views that are “too demanding” since they impose greater overall costs and focus these costs on those who are least able to bear them.

David Sobel develops this argument in [The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection](#):³

Consider the case of Joe and Sally. Joe has two healthy kidneys and can live a decent but reduced life with only one. Sally needs one of Joe’s kidneys to live. Even though the transfer would result in a situation that is better overall, the Demandingness Objection’s thought is that it is asking so much of Joe to give up a kidney that he is morally permitted to not give. The size of the cost to Joe makes the purported moral demand that Joe give the kidney unreasonable, or at least not genuinely morally obligatory on Joe. Consequentialism, our intuitions tell us, is too demanding on Joe when it requires that he sacrifice a kidney to Sally.

But consider things from Sally’s point of view. Suppose she were to complain about the size of the cost that a non-Consequentialist moral theory permits to befall her. Suppose she were to say that such a moral theory, in permitting others to allow her to die when they could aid her, is excessively demanding on her. Clearly Sally has not yet fully understood how philosophers typically intend the Demandingness Objection. What has she failed to get about the Objection? Why is Consequentialism too demanding on the person who would suffer significant costs if he was to aid others as Consequentialism requires, but non-Consequentialist morality is not similarly too demanding on Sally, the person who would suffer more significant costs if she were not aided as the alternative to Consequentialism permits?⁴

We may cast further doubt on our demandingness intuitions by noting other apparent inconsistencies in their application. For instance, many philosophers—utilitarian and non-utilitarian alike—would readily accept that morality can be very demanding in wartime. Under the circumstances of war they might think that people may have to make great sacrifices, including giving up their property or even their life. Yet in peacetime today hundreds of millions of people live in dire circumstances of [extreme poverty](#), and billions of animals [suffer in factory farms](#) and are killed every year. At the same time, many affluent people enjoy a wide range of luxury goods

and have access to effective channels through which they could assist the poor. From the utilitarian perspective, the world today is just as high-stakes as it is in wartime. For this reason it is no more demanding—and arguably much less—to require the affluent to donate money to assist the poor in the present day than it is to require soldiers to sacrifice their lives in a war against, say, cruel authoritarianism.

It is worth noting that utilitarianism would not ask as much of us if most affluent individuals acted morally and shared more of their resources with those most in need. Utilitarianism only becomes so demanding because few affluent people do anything significant to address the major problems in the world. However, even if the affluent were so charitable that there was negligible value in further charity, there would still be occasions when utilitarianism would make great demands of one, such as when one must sacrifice one's own life to save the lives of several others. Therefore, while the present point mitigates the force of the demandingness objection somewhat, it does not disarm it completely.

Attacking the Alternatives

A third response is to argue that non-utilitarian moral views are often *insufficiently demanding*. We have already established that citizens of affluent countries can prevent a substantial amount of suffering and death in developing nations at a comparably low cost to themselves by donating to highly effective aid organizations. According to many non-utilitarian views, it is good but entirely *optional* to donate a significant portion of our income to charity. However, this is arguably not demanding enough since it entails that we are not required to save lives even when we can do so at a low cost to ourselves. These views violate Peter Singer's [intuitively plausible assertion](#) that “if 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”.⁵ [As Singer explains](#), most people agree that it would be morally monstrous to just watch a child drown in a shallow pond when you could easily save them at the cost of ruining your expensive clothes. Saving innocent lives is worth some moderate financial cost, and any reasonable moral theory needs to reflect that fact.

In addition, proponents of utilitarianism can note that non-utilitarian views are sometimes even more demanding. Recall Sobel's example involving Joe and Sally. Commonsense ethics prohibits Sally from stealing one of Joe's kidneys, even if that would be the only way to save her own life (and the harm to Joe would only be moderate). This shows that commonsense morality can be very demanding sometimes, even requiring you to give up your life on moral grounds. While utilitarianism makes *different* demands from other moral theories, the demands of utilitarianism are not obviously less reasonable. They always have a good principled basis, after all.

Tolerating the Intuition

Finally, proponents of utilitarianism may simply “bite the bullet” and accept that morality is very demanding. They may point out that utilitarian demands are grounded in the compelling goal to

create a flourishing world with as much well-being as possible for everyone. Whenever utilitarianism requires us to give up something we value to benefit others, at least we know that this benefit is greater, often much greater, than the cost to us.

Next: The Alienation Objection

Other Objections to Utilitarianism

How to Cite This Page

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<https://www.utilitarianism.net/objections-to-utilitarianism/demandingness>, accessed 3/13/2023.

Resources and Further Reading

- Brian Berkey (2016). [The Demandingness of Morality: Toward a Reflective Equilibrium](#). *Philosophical Studies*. 173(11): 3015–3035.
- Peter Singer (1972). [Famine, Affluence, and Morality](#). *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1(3): 229–243.
- Peter Singer & Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek (2014). [The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press., pp. 317–336.
- Krister Bykvist (2010). [Utilitarianism: A Guide for the Perplexed](#). London: Continuum. Chapter 7: Is Utilitarianism too Demanding?
- David Sobel (2007). [The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection](#). *Philosophers' Imprint*. 7(8): 1–17.
- Shelly Kagan (1984). [Does Consequentialism Demand Too Much? Recent work on the Limits of Obligation](#). *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. 13(3): 239–254.
- Susan Wolf (1982). [Moral Saints](#). *The Journal of Philosophy*. 79(8): 419–434.

1. Cf. Wolf, S. (1982). [Moral Saints](#). *The Journal of Philosophy*. 79(8): 419–439. ↻

2. GiveWell (2019). [Against Malaria Foundation](#). ↻

3. Sobel, D. (2007). [The impotence of the demandingness objection](#). *Philosophers' Imprint*, 7: 1–17, p.3. ↻

4. Sobel continues: “What must the Objection’s understanding of the demands of a moral theory be such that that would make sense? There is an obvious answer that has appealed even to prominent critics of the Objection — that the costs of what a moral theory requires are more demanding than the costs of what a moral theory permits to befall the unaided, size of cost held constant. 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 Demandingness intuitions.”

It seems, then, that there are no *neutral* grounds for considering utilitarianism to be “more demanding” than rival moral theories, at least in the sense of imposing excessively great costs on agents. One can only get this verdict by stacking the deck against utilitarianism by implicitly defining “demandingness” in such a way as to only take a certain subclass of costs fully into account. ↩

5. Singer, P. (1972). [Famine, Affluence, and Morality](#). *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1(3): 229–243, p.231. ↩