

CHAPTER 13

MUST I BENEFIT MYSELF?

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ALTRUISM—THE selfless concern for others—dominates most popular conceptions of morality. Our moral role models tend to be those with reputations for devotion to others' well-being (such as Mother Theresa) or for great personal sacrifice to serve others (such as Nelson Mandela). On this altruistic picture, benevolence and sympathy are the primary moral virtues. A number of philosophers have agreed, arguing that altruism is all there is to the moral point of view. Morality, on this picture, is "purely and essentially other-regarding."¹

On its face, consequentialism accords well with this altruistic conception of morality. A central message of consequentialist moral thinking has been that nearly all moral agents are exceedingly partial in their moral outlooks and so cast too narrow a net of moral concern; taking altruism seriously entails becoming far more concerned for the needs or interests of others, including those of distant strangers, future generations, and nonhuman animals, groups often consigned to the periphery of ordinary moral thought. This same message—that morality places stringent demands on our altruism—is also evident in consequentialist writings on practical ethics, which teach that the affluent have moral obligations to donate large portions of their wealth to assist the global poor²; that having met their children's needs, parents ought to prioritize other children's needs above their children's wants³; and that societies should implement schemes to allocate scarce goods such as transplant organs with the aim of saving the greatest number of lives overall.⁴ Consequentialism thus seems to embrace a picture of morality wherein concern for others is paramount while concern for oneself is minimal or nonexistent, a picture in which morality assigns "no positive value to the well-being or happiness of the

¹ Stephen Finlay, "Too Much Morality?" in *Morality and Self-Interest*, edited by Paul Bloomfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142.

² Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–243.

³ James Rachels, "Morality, Parents, and Children," in his *Can Ethics Provide Answers?: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 213–234.

⁴ John Harris, "The Survival Lottery," *Philosophy* 50 (1975): 81–87.

moral agent of the sort it clearly assigns to the well-being or happiness of *everyone other than the agent*.⁵

It may therefore be surprising that standard versions of consequentialism seem to entail that sometimes individuals not only may, but in fact must, benefit themselves. Consider these two examples:

Enrollment: Josephine, a university philosophy student, is searching for a final course to complete her schedule for the next term. She sees that there is a single spot available in a course offered by her favorite ethics professor. Josephine is about to enroll in the course using the university's online system, but at the last moment, she texts her friend Kelly, who finds ethics tolerable but not engaging, to let her know of the spot in the ethics course, which Kelly takes. Despite knowing that she would benefit more from the ethics course than Kelly would, Josephine ends up enrolling in a lackluster course in modal logic.

Evacuation: Igor is a solitary, elderly man with no surviving family and few acquaintances. He is frail and undergoing steady cognitive decline. Working or contributing to socially valuable activities is therefore not a viable possibility for him. These challenges notwithstanding, Igor is able to address his basic physical needs on his own and enjoys a good quality of life. He is content to spend his days reading war histories and watching sports on television. One afternoon, a fire breaks out in his apartment building. Rescue crews quickly arrive and give an immediate evacuation order for all of the apartment's residents. Though he is capable of evacuating the building, Igor remains in his apartment, knowing that he could well die from the fire. He is killed when he inhales the smoke that soon pervades the building.

From a naïve or pretheoretical moral view, how should these examples be analyzed and evaluated? In Enrollment, Josephine acts altruistically inasmuch as she foregoes her slot in the ethics course so that Kelly can enroll in it. This seems morally permissible, even laudable. In Evacuation, we might find Igor's decision odd; we would naturally wonder why, unless he had been depressed, and so on, he would willingly choose to end a life that seems congenial if unambitious. And our moral reaction might differ if ending his life caused others to suffer or to grieve. But given his isolation and his inability to contribute much to the happiness of others, his death affected only him, and while questions might be raised about whether Igor acted *prudently*, he does not seem to act *wrongfully*.

Orthodox forms of consequentialism have difficulty validating such responses though. Standard act consequentialism holds that agents are obligated to bring about the best outcome, that is, the outcome that realizes the greatest good overall in comparison with alternatives. But the agents in Enrollment and Evacuation do not satisfy this standard. In the former, Josephine stood to gain more from enrolling in the ethics course than Kelly did. By giving Kelly the opportunity to enroll in the ethics course, Josephine made Kelly better off, but not by a quantity as great as the quantity of goods Josephine would have enjoyed if she had enrolled in the ethics course herself. By the

⁵ Michael Slote, "Some Advantages of Virtue Ethics," *Identity, Character, and Morality*, edited by Owen Flanagan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 441.

lights of standard act consequentialism, Josephine's altruistic act was wrong: she could have, but did not, perform the act resulting in the greatest good overall. Let us call examples such as Enrollment, in which an agent's action results in good for others but maximal good would have resulted from her choosing to direct greater benefits to herself instead, *nonoffsetting failures to self-benefit*.

Evacuation is not an example of a nonoffsetting failure to self-benefit. For Igor's not evacuating does not result in some quantity of goods being enjoyed by others. Rather, Igor's choosing not to evacuate amounts to him failing to benefit himself, but no one else benefits thereby either. Evacuation thus represents an instance of *pure failure to self-benefit*. Nevertheless, standard act consequentialism condemns Igor's choice on the same general grounds as it condemns Josephine's: he too failed to bring about the greatest good in comparison with alternatives. Put differently, when only our own well-being is at stake, consequentialism seems to demand that we maximize our well-being, a result at odds with the sense that failing to benefit oneself (or to benefit oneself to the utmost) may be unwise but is rarely immoral.

These examples illustrate that, despite its theoretical and practical emphasis on benefitting others, consequentialism appears susceptible to a *compulsory self-benefit objection*: it requires that individuals direct benefits to themselves when doing so is entailed by the consequentialist demand to maximize good overall, despite its being intuitively morally permissible, or even praiseworthy, for individuals not to direct those benefits to themselves.

The compulsory self-benefit objection has force because it flows directly from features of consequentialism that many of its adherents find attractive. What unites consequentialist theories is the conviction that the moral status of actions is a function solely of the outcomes of those actions, and in particular, how good or desirable these outcomes are in comparison to one another. The compulsory self-benefit objection gets its traction in part from this conviction, since failures to benefit oneself seem to result in outcomes that are worse overall. Likewise, consequentialists generally point with pride at its incorporating a strong notion of impartiality, wherein the concerns, interests, well-being, and so on of all affected by an action are taken into account equally when determining how good that action's outcome is.⁶ Josephine and Igor are seemingly required to benefit themselves because doing so assigns their own concerns, interests, well-being, and so on equal weight to that of others. The theoretical interest of the compulsory self-benefit objection therefore resides in the fact that it arises from features of consequentialism that seem to speak in the theory's favor.

Compared to other objections to consequentialism, the compulsory self-benefit objection has garnered little attention. The purpose of this article is therefore to explore how consequentialists might best answer the compulsory self-benefit objection. While some might find "biting the bullet" sufficient—acknowledging the force of the objection but maintaining that the other merits of consequentialism outweigh that force—I shall

⁶ See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 20–24, for a canonical expression of this principle of "equal consideration of interests."

assume that consequentialists would prefer to answer the objection on its face in a way that does minimal damage to their theory. The challenge, then, is to ascertain how consequentialism might permit individuals not to benefit themselves without relinquishing the commitments that give consequentialism its theoretical appeal.

I cannot consider every strategy by which consequentialists might try to answer the compulsory self-benefit objection. Here I will canvass several strategies that either strike me as particularly promising or have not been previously explored.⁷ Ultimately, the strategies I consider here all founder on one or more of the following three worries: first, they do not account for a broad enough spectrum of the intuitively morally permissible instances of failures to self-benefit (for example, pure failures to self-benefit); second, they address the objection through ad hoc maneuvers that license failures to self-benefit without motivating these maneuvers by appeal to consequentialist principles or commitments; or third, they do not adequately explain how the permissibility of failing to benefit oneself is grounded in a moral option—that is, they do not provide compelling explanations of how *both* benefitting oneself and failing to do so are morally permissible. I do not take their failures to demonstrate the impossibility of a credible consequentialist response to the compulsory self-benefit objection. But their failures do suggest that the objection is more formidable than the extant literature implies, and defenders of consequentialism would be wise to exert more effort in explicitly answering it.

Our discussion unfolds as follows. In the next section, I consider whether consequentialist theories that evaluate actions in terms of their motives can answer the compulsory self-benefit objection. Section 2 turns to two ways of addressing the objection by deviating from standard maximizing forms of consequentialism. In sections 3 and 4, I argue that the objection can be classified as an instance of more familiar objections to consequentialism—that it gives insufficient due to special relationships and is exceedingly demanding, respectively—but consequentialist responses to those more familiar objections do not readily apply to the compulsory self-benefit objection. Section 5 considers whether dual-ranking act consequentialism has the resources to answer this objection through its appeal to the distinction between an agent's moral reasons and her all-things-considered reasons for action. In my concluding section, I propose that an adequate consequentialist response to the compulsory self-benefit object must account for options directed at the self, a notion difficult to reconcile with central consequentialist commitments.

1. MOTIVE CONSEQUENTIALISM

As noted at the outset, altruism and beneficence are generally applauded, greed and self-indulgence generally deplored. This might suggest that a consequentialist theory that

⁷ I engage with some strategies not addressed here in my "Agents, Patients, and Compulsory Self-benefit," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 11 (2014): 159–184.

takes motives rather than acts as its focus could offer a satisfactory response to the compulsory self-benefit objection.

Suppose that an individual *S*'s action *A* is obligatory only if *S* would perform *A* if *S* were to act on the basis of a set of desires *D* that, on balance and over time, leads *S* to maximize overall goodness through her actions. We might view this as the core of an "ideal motivation" consequentialist theory, wherein acts are judged indirectly, not in terms of whether they themselves maximize overall goodness but in terms of whether an agent whose motivations conduce to maximizing goodness would perform such acts.

A crucial question regarding this theory is, "what is *D*?" This version of consequentialism would be ineffective against the compulsory self-benefit objection if *D* is the desire to maximize overall goodness. For an agent motivated by that desire *would* choose to maximize overall goodness, thus ruling out failures of self-benefit. However, some philosophers have argued that the motives the possession of which would maximize overall goodness would not include the motive to maximize overall goodness, much in the way that being motivated to maximize pleasure may actually undercut the aim of maximizing one's pleasure.⁸ The question at hand, then, is whether the set of goodness-maximizing desires would include, or allow for, failures to self-benefit. On its face, we might expect that a goodness-maximizing set of desires would be primarily benevolent or other-focused: given our egoistic propensities, a set of desires that counteracts those propensities by largely directing our attention and concern toward the interests of others would lead to high levels of goodness overall. A community of altruists, we would anticipate, would be better off than a community of egoists. If so, then agents motivated by those desires that maximize overall goodness would only rarely benefit themselves when doing so is best overall. An ideal motive consequentialism might therefore give significant breadth to failures to benefit oneself.

This reasoning is too quick though. For one, in cases of pure self-benefit, no one else's interests are at stake, and yet it seems permissible not to maximize benefits to oneself. An ideally motivated agent should be willing to benefit herself in such a case, in opposition to her generally benevolent motives. This reasoning also neglects how the pursuit of self-interest can sometimes redound to the benefit of others. One need not be a dyed-in-the-wool Mandevillean to recognize that at least sometimes the ardent pursuit of one's self-interest can also promote the interests of others. When we pursue our own good through cooperative endeavors with others or when we produce goods we exchange with others, we increase overall well-being despite being guided by selfish motives. Finally, there are dangers in excessive benevolence or concern for others. A theme within some feminist writings is that traditional patriarchal cultures can encourage women to prioritize the interests of others over women's own interests, resulting in the reinforcement of oppressive practices and the diminution of women's self-respect.⁹ So while an ideally motivated consequentialist agent might be predominantly altruistic, her motivations can err too far in that direction, and there may be a significant number

⁸ See Robert Merrihew Adams, "Motive Utilitarianism," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 467–481.

⁹ Diana T. Meyers, "The Politics of Self-Respect: A Feminist Perspective," *Hypatia* 1 (1986): 83–100.

of instances wherein purely altruistic motivation fails to be best from a consequentialist perspective because one's own interests are neglected. Sorting out just how often an ideally motivated consequentialist agent would attend to her self-interest is a complex empirical matter that I cannot hope to settle here. Still, any such consequentialist theory will face the problem of how to situate the interests of the self within a largely altruistic motivational economy without ignoring the interests of the self in ways that consequentialism rejects.

2. NONMAXIMIZATION STRATEGIES

Consequentialists may seek to address the self-benefit objection by adopting a non-maximizing standard of obligatory action that allows for failures to self-benefit. For example, satisficing consequentialists may propose that so long as agents produce a sufficient amount of good through their actions, they meet their obligations. And in cases of failures of self-benefit, agents may fail to maximize overall good while still producing enough good by consequentialist lights. In both Enrollment and Evacuation, perhaps Josephine and Igor do *well enough* even if they do not do what is impartially best.

Moving to a satisficing rather than maximizing standard has the advantage of explaining how self-benefit is an option: an agent acts rightly if, by failing to benefit herself, she either does well enough or if she exceeds the satisficing standard. A satisficing standard thus permits, but does not require, maximization. The difficulty with this strategy is that the moral permission not to benefit oneself appears very wide, and there is no particular reason to expect that all instances in which an agent fails to benefit herself will meet the satisficing standard. Take Evacuation: suppose Igor foregoes a very large amount of good to himself by failing to evacuate. If doing so is permissible, then satisficing consequentialism would, in order to vindicate this conclusion, have to depart significantly from a maximizing standard. But there is no apparent basis for adopting such a lenient satisficing standard aside from its ability to address failures to self-benefit. Why, after all, should we expect that a qualitative property actions may have (i.e., that they fail to benefit oneself to the greatest degree) will coincide with a quantitative property of actions (i.e., that they produce enough good to meet the satisficing consequentialists' demands) in every instance? We have better reason, I suggest, to expect that any intuitively plausible satisficing standard will at least sometimes disallow apparently permissible failures of self-benefit.

Moreover, such a wide departure from maximization would presumably apply not only in instances of failures of self-benefit but across the board, that is, to situations where an individual falls short of maximization solely with regard to how much good her actions produce for others. But absent some rationale for restricting these deviations only to self-regarding deviations, a satisficing strategy for answering the compulsory self-benefit objection runs the risk of asking too little of agents with respect to others' good.

Another way to answer the compulsory self-benefit objection by jettisoning strict maximization is to incorporate a distinction between benefits to an agent and benefits to others. Ted Sider, for example, has put forth a self/other asymmetrical consequentialist theory wherein if agent S performs act A, then A is obligatory if and only if (1) no other action produces more impartial overall good than A, and (2) no other action produces more good from the “selfless perspective” that excludes those goods that A provided to S.¹⁰ Sider furthermore proposes that if two alternative actions A and B are such that A satisfies condition (1) but not condition (2), while B satisfies condition (2) but not condition (1), then A and B represent a moral “tie,” in which case an individual can permissibly perform either A or B. Sider’s revised consequentialist standard would appear to answer the compulsory self-benefit objection insofar as it denies that self-benefit is morally obligatory. If we apply it to Enrollment, it would seem true that Josephine’s enrolling in the ethics course satisfies condition (1) but not condition (2), since there is no action that results in more impartial good, but there is an action—facilitating Kelly’s enrollment—that produces more good when the goods that might accrue to Josephine are excluded. Her facilitating Kelly’s enrollment is permissible (though Josephine’s enrolling would be permissible as well).

In the case of Evacuation, however, Sider’s asymmetrical consequentialism stumbles. Igor’s evacuating rather than remaining in his apartment satisfies Sider’s condition (1), since his evacuating benefits him and thus (assuming that others’ interests are unaffected by his decision) would be better with respect to overall personal good. But Igor’s remaining also satisfies Sider’s condition (2), because no other action besides Igor’s remaining (including his evacuating) produces more good from the “selfless perspective” that excludes whatever goods that Igor gains from remaining. His remaining rather than evacuating makes no difference from that perspective. Thus, remaining versus evacuating is not a tie, and Igor violates his moral obligations by remaining. Sider’s revision to consequentialism thus seems to yield intuitively plausible answers in cases of offsetting failures to self-benefit but not in cases of pure failures to self-benefit.

But even if Sider’s asymmetrical consequentialism succeeded in making sense of pure failures to self-benefit, it has the deeper theoretical defect of addressing the compulsory self-benefit objection in a largely ad hoc manner. As Sider himself recognizes, his revisions to standard consequentialism may lead to more plausible results about the “moral normative status of actions,” but these results are not grounded in any “independently important axiological facts.”¹¹ And consequentialists themselves should have reservations about modifying the consequentialist standard to address the compulsory self-benefit objection. Both satisficing consequentialism and Sider’s asymmetrical consequentialism tacitly reject maximization, and the latter rejects impartiality. To the extent then that maximization and impartiality are compelling features of the consequentialist moral framework, these revisions to the consequentialist framework represent theoretical costs, and at least some consequentialists (I expect) will find these costs

¹⁰ Ted Sider, “Asymmetry and Self-sacrifice,” *Philosophical Studies* 70 (1993): 117–132.

¹¹ Sider, “Asymmetry and Self-sacrifice,” 128.

not a reasonable concession to the theory's critics but the repudiation of what makes consequentialism appealing in the first place.

3. SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Consequentialists have proven very resourceful in answering the many objections to which their theory has been subject. Thus, if the compulsory self-benefit objection resembles an extant objection to which consequentialists have given compelling replies, then an adequate response to the objection may emerge. Let us now consider whether such a strategy may succeed in connection with the complaint that consequentialism places inadequate stock in *special relationships*.

This objection holds that because consequentialists generally insist on impartiality, their theory cannot make sense of instances where partiality is morally permissible, even laudable. Chief among these instances of laudable partiality is our tendency to accord the interests of those close to us—our romantic partners, children, friends, and family members—greater weight in our decision making than the interests of mere strangers.

The compulsory self-benefit objection can be analyzed as an idiosyncratic instance of the special relationships objection. If we are morally permitted not to benefit ourselves even when doing so would be required by the consequentialist demand to maximize overall goodness, then this permission can be viewed as reflecting a permissible “partiality” toward ourselves. This partiality is different from the partiality licensed by other special relationships. For whereas those relationships seem to entitle us to accord certain individuals’ interests *greater* weight in our decision making, the special relationship to self seems to license us assigning *lesser* weight to our own interests in our decision making, that is, to allow us not to benefit ourselves. Our distinctive relationships toward particular others establishes special obligations; our distinctive relationship to ourselves establishes special options.

It is unlikely though that the arguments consequentialists have deployed in order to validate special relationships can be applied in the case of compulsory self-benefit and the special relationship to self.

One such argument is that attending to our special relationships, despite being a deviation from impartial consequentialist reasoning, in fact results in the best overall consequences. Realizing impartially best outcomes may sometimes be the result of partiality, so that when we care for our friends to a greater degree than we care for strangers, we strengthen practices that, in general and for the most part, redound to everyone’s benefit. It may be, then, that consequentialism does not only permit the cultivation and recognition of special relationships. Rather, the consequentialist project of maximizing overall goodness will *require* their cultivation and recognition. But this argument extends uncomfortably to our special relationship to self: being “partial” by discounting our own well-being may result in greater overall well-being in nonoffsetting failures of

self-benefit such as Enrollment, yet it seems unlikely that it results in greater overall well-being in pure failures to self-benefit such as Evacuation. For recall that Igor's remaining in his apartment harms him with no compensating gain to others.¹²

A second way consequentialists have addressed the special relationships objection is by claiming that such relationships are not means to valuable ends or outcomes, but are intrinsically valuable in their own right. The partiality shown in special relationships is necessary and morally justified because it is part and parcel of something good in itself. Here too it is difficult to see how this line of thought can be extended to the self and apparently permissible failures to benefit ourselves. Again, the failure to benefit ourselves is an option; that is, it is also permissible for agents to choose to benefit themselves as well. To fail in one's special *obligations* to one's friends, say, is to undercut whatever value our friendships have. But in the case of the special relationship to ourselves, the relationship cannot be undercut by what we do (or fail to do) in the way of benefitting ourselves, and if something is good in itself regardless of whether our actions maintain it or not, it is hard to decipher how the putative good is a good in any recognizably consequentialist sense. If an agent could equally maintain this good by benefitting herself and by failing to do so, then this good is not an outcome of what she does and so does not look like a good with which consequentialist morality is concerned.

4. DEMANDINGNESS

Another familiar objection to consequentialism that resembles the compulsory self-benefit objection is the complaint that consequentialism is too *demanding*.¹³

The usual gloss on this objection is that consequentialism requires us to forego more of our interests or well-being than it is reasonable or morally defensible to demand. The impartial maximization of overall good appears to entail that we are obligated to forego most luxuries in order to donate large sums of money to the poor; that we are obligated to forego the pleasures of meat eating in order to curtail harms to animals; or that we are obligated to choose our careers not on the basis of our aspirations or values but on the basis of which careers will do the most good. Such demands, the objection goes, are unreasonable. Either a more plausible consequentialist theory, making less extensive demands on individuals' well-being, must be expounded or we should reject consequentialism altogether.

¹² I take such reasoning to also speak against "sophisticated" consequentialist attempts to answer the compulsory self-benefit objection. See my "Agents, Patients, and Compulsory Self-benefit," for more discussion.

¹³ See, in a very large literature, Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford, 1984); Liam B. Murphy, "The Demands of Beneficence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 267–292; and Tim Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

So described, the demandingness objection and the compulsory self-benefit objection may seem unrelated. After all, the latter is the complaint that consequentialism requires us to benefit ourselves, whereas the former is the complaint that consequentialism precludes us from benefitting ourselves in ways that seem morally defensible. However, the demandingness objection can be recast in terms of *options*, with the result that the compulsory self-benefit objection is an instance of it: consequentialism is unreasonably demanding in depriving us of options,¹⁴ including the apparently permissible option of failing to benefit ourselves. So depicted, that consequentialism disallows failures to self-benefit shows that it encumbers us not only in terms of our well-being but in terms of our exercising our capacities of choice. Independently from its constraining (perhaps unreasonably) our pursuit of our well-being, consequentialism is too “confining” with respect to the options it leaves us,¹⁵ including options regarding self-benefit.

Debates about the demandingness of consequentialism have generally concerned how to temper the demands of beneficence rather than the demands of self-interest. Yet if the compulsory self-benefit objection is an instance of the demandingness objection, then that provides a reason to suppose that consequentialist rejoinders to the demandingness objection might also serve as effective rejoinder to the compulsory self-benefit objection. In particular, this strategy would be effective against the compulsory self-benefit objection if consequentialist answers to the demandingness objection, despite having been developed to accommodate agents’ pursuit of their own interests, could be extrapolated to accommodate agents’ abnegation of their own interests. It is difficult to see how such an extrapolation could be achieved though.

One possibility is to argue that reductions in overall value due to failures to self-benefit are mitigated by other goods involved in the exercise of choice. So in the case of Enrollment, even though Josephine’s helping Kelly enroll in the ethics course may be worse overall from the standpoint of well-being (since Kelly benefits less from the course than Josephine would), her doing so has value insofar as it is an exercise of liberty, autonomy, or the like. And if the value of Josephine’s choosing is equal to or greater than the value of the well-being she foregoes by helping Kelly enroll, then appearances notwithstanding, Josephine has satisfied the consequentialist standard of maximization. For no other action ranks better in terms of overall good than her helping Kelly enroll in the ethics course.

This reasoning suffers from two defects. First, the value of choice will, in general, contribute as much value as agents forego when they fail to benefit themselves is an unlikely thesis. Again, suppose in Evacuation that Igor foregoes a great deal of well-being by remaining in his apartment. There is no obvious reason to suppose that this amount of well-being is counterbalanced by some equal or greater quantity of well-being associated with his exercising her power to choose not to benefit himself. Second, recall that the permissibility of failing to benefit oneself rests on an option: It is permissible to

¹⁴ David Sobel, “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 7 (2007) www.philosophersimprint.org/007008/, 2.

¹⁵ Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 98.

benefit oneself or to forego such benefits. This reasoning cannot make sense of such an option. For suppose in Enrollment that Josephine decides instead to enroll in the ethics course herself. In order for this to be a permissible option on a consequentialist view, it must (with respect to overall good) tie with her actual decision to help Kelly enroll in the course. But that appears impossible. For assuming that whatever contribution her choosing makes to the overall value of the ensuing state of affairs remains steady (i.e., that value is the same regardless of which option she chooses), then because her own enrollment promotes the greatest amount of well-being overall, then her enrolling must produce the greatest good overall. The only way to avoid this conclusion is to prove the unlikely claim that when Josephine helps Kelly enroll, the value of her so choosing exceeds the value associated with her choosing to enroll herself.

The other general route for addressing the demandingness objection is accommodationist—to establish an “agent-centered prerogative” that allows agents not to “devote energy and attention to their projects and commitments *in strict proportion* to the value from an impersonal standpoint of their doing so.”¹⁶ As developed by Samuel Scheffler, the agent-centered prerogative is intended to enable agents to permissibly pursue their central projects and commitments even when doing so would, from a strictly impersonal point of view, not be maximally good.

The agent-centered prerogative thus seems to license morally permissible failures of self-benefit, since they too are deviations from what would be maximizing from an impersonal point of view.

Here again, that failures to self-benefit are exercises of moral options stymies consequentialist efforts to answer the compulsory self-benefit objection. If the appeal to an agent-centered prerogative amounts to asserting that when agents fail to benefit themselves they do not maximize overall well-being but do realize other goods—the value of choice, autonomy, integrity, and so on—then this is simply a restatement of the strategy we just rejected. But if it is not an appeal to the value of choice, it is hard to see that the considerations that motivate an agent-centered prerogative allowing individuals to forego maximizing good in the service of their central projects and commitments support the moral permissibility of an option not to benefit oneself. For the intuitive basis of this option is not a moral permission *not to maximize* because of some compelling reason that emerges from within individuals’ personal points of view. Consider Evacuation again: Igor presumably does not maximize goodness by remaining in his apartment. But the moral permissibility of his doing so is not faithfully captured by the thought he thereby permissibly fails to maximize overall well-being. Scheffler’s agent-centered prerogative allows agents not to maximize impersonal goodness by taking into account agent-centered reasons rooted in their personal projects and commitments. The picture suggested here is that when such reasons are arrayed against impersonal reasons, they will at least sometimes (but not necessarily) be sufficiently compelling to establish a moral permission for agents not to maximize impersonal goodness. Examples such as Evacuation remind us that the moral permission not to benefit

¹⁶ Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, 9–10.

ourselves is very wide, not an option to *discount* our well-being to some degree but an option to exempt our well-being, partially or in full, from the moral calculus as we see fit. Igor's permission not to benefit himself does not flow from any judgment regarding whether he correctly balances impersonal reasons with agent-centered ones. It instead rests on a *right to disregard* his well-being for moral purposes, an entitlement to set aside his well-being so far as moral decision making goes. We prescind from moral criticism of choices like Igor's from a recognition that his relationship to his good is his business. Agents thus enjoy a sort of *authority* with respect to their own well-being. This authority may be cashed out in terms of what Joseph Raz called "exclusionary reasons," reasons "to refrain from acting for some reason."¹⁷ When a commanding officer gives a soldier a binding order to X, the order serves as a reason that "excludes" whatever reasons the soldier might otherwise have that bear on X, mooted those reasons in the soldier's deliberation. In like manner, I suggest, the moral permissibility of not benefitting ourselves flows from an authoritative relation we have to our well-being, one that permits us to exclude our well-being from the domain of moral appraisal—to treat our own well-being as irrelevant to moral choice. Note that the permissibility of failures to self-benefit is itself a *moral* permission; for it would be morally objectionable in most cases to compel individuals to benefit themselves. But it is a permission not rooted in the quality or magnitude of a person's reasons, impersonal or agent-centered, but in a basic moral *power* to exclude one's own good from the practical determination of what is morally best or obligatory.¹⁸

Consequentialist responses to the demandingness objection are therefore unlikely to succeed in addressing the compulsory self-benefit objection: if they appeal to how failures to maximize (say) overall well-being can be counteracted by other goods, then it is unlikely that these other goods are just valuable enough to establish an option between benefitting ourselves and failing to do so. And effective ties between these options are unlikely given the apparently wide breadth of permissible failures to self-benefit. If consequentialists attempt to extend the agent-centered prerogative to failure to self-benefit, this incorrectly grounds the permission not to benefit ourselves in the balance of reasons among impersonal and agent-relative reasons. The evidently wide permissibility of not benefitting ourselves, I propose, appears to instead be rooted in a moral power to exclude our own well-being from moral deliberation and choice.

5. DUAL-RANKING CONSEQUENTIALISM

A final theoretical option for addressing the compulsory self-benefit objection is dual-ranking act consequentialism. The theory and its philosophical motivations are too

¹⁷ Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 39.

¹⁸ For an elaboration of moral agency in terms of practical powers, see Michael Cholbi, "Paternalism and Our Rational Powers," *Mind* 126 (2017):123–153.

complex to investigate in depth here. But the gist of the theory (as articulated by Douglas Portmore¹⁹) is as follows: Because they morally evaluate actions in terms of their outcomes, all consequentialist theories are necessarily committed to ranking outcomes in terms of their being better or worse. Orthodox versions of consequentialism rank outcomes in terms of value or goodness from an evaluator-neutral point of view. Portmore's dual-ranking theory diverges from these versions of consequentialism in two ways. First, outcomes are ranked not in terms of the goodness or value resulting from an action but in terms of the desirability of outcomes. Second, outcomes are ranked both in terms of moral reasons (i.e., reasons rooted in what outcomes would be better for others²⁰) and nonmoral reasons, with the latter including what are standardly thought of as agent-relative reasons, such as a person's reason to want to not cause harm to others (understood as distinct from the agent-neutral reason not to want harms to occur). By incorporating these nonmoral, personal reasons, dual-ranking theory provides a ranking that is relative to particular evaluators or agents. Moral permissibility, on Portmore's picture, does not turn solely on moral reasons. For given the truth of moral rationalism—that agents can only be morally required to do what they have decisive reasons to do, all things considered—it may be the case that agents have sufficient reason not to do what moral reasons alone mandate. Moral permissibility thus turns on both moral reasons and an agent's all-things-considered reasons, so that an act is morally permissible for a given agent “if and only if, and because, there is no available act alternative that would produce an outcome that [the agent] has both more moral reason and more reason, all things considered, to want to obtain.”²¹ Dual-ranking act consequentialism appears capable of answering the compulsory self-benefit objection because it provides agents morally permissible options when outcomes diverge with respect to moral versus all-things-considered reasons. The option not to benefit oneself arises when an agent has a nonmoral reason to benefit herself²² such that this reason, in concert with her other reasons, entails that she has most reason all-things-considered to benefit herself but most moral reason not to benefit herself. Thus, in examples such as Enrollment, we may view Josephine as (a) having more moral reason to enable Kelly's enrollment, since that results in the better outcome for others, but (b) most reason all-things-considered to enroll herself. By making logical space for agents to act on options that do not maximize goodness from an all-things-considered perspective, dual-ranking consequentialism looks especially promising in addressing the compulsory self-benefit objection. That said, this strategy faces difficulties on two fronts.

First, dual-ranking act consequentialism analyzes options in terms of divergences between moral and nonmoral (or between moral and all-things-considered) agents' reasons. But we may wonder whether all instances of failure to self-benefit can be analyzed in this way. In Enrollment, Josephine may well face a situation in which her moral

¹⁹ Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁰ Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 94.

²¹ Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 118.

²² Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 40.

reasons point one way and her nonmoral reasons another way. Perhaps, then, dual-ranking act consequentialism fares well in accounting for cases of nonoffsetting failures of self-benefit. But it appears shakier with respect to cases of pure failures of self-benefit, such as Igor in *Evacuation*. Again, we may be curious as to what Igor's reasons for not evacuating and so causing himself harm are. But his remaining being permissible does not seem to be a matter of his having *more* reason all-things-considered to remain in his apartment, reasons in comparison to which his moral reasons are comparatively modest. Only *his* good is at stake. It looks as if his moral and nonmoral reasons align here such that the permissibility of his not benefitting himself cannot be traced to any facts about how weighty those reasons are in relation to one another.

More generally, dual-ranking act consequentialism, even when it logically implies permissible failures of self-benefit, may not provide the most parsimonious explanation of the option not to benefit oneself. Portmore dubs his dual-ranking consequentialism "common sense" inasmuch as it recognizes that moral reasons are not rationally decisive. But I doubt that "common-sense" reactions to cases of failure to self-benefit would judge them permissible *because* in such instances, an agent has no other act alternative available to her that "would produce an outcome that [the agent] has both more moral reason and more reason, all things considered, to want to obtain." As we noted in the previous section, Igor's failure to benefit himself is immune to moral criticism, most would say, because his not benefitting himself is his right, an option to which he is entitled because he is deciding about his own good instead of the good of others. Other moral agents do not so much judge his act as morally permissible in light of his reasons as they do prescind from judging his reasons at all. For like other competent moral agents, Igor's relationship to his good (and Josephine's to hers) is largely his business, and while he may sometimes be entitled to prioritize his good, he is no less entitled to deprioritize his good without reference to the first-order reasons that motivate his deprioritizing it.

Dual-ranking act consequentialism errs, I suggest, in trying to account for options such as the permissibility not to benefit oneself by reference to agents' first-order reasons for action. It is probably correct to deny that moral *reasons* necessarily give agents decisive reasons for action and so exhaust the factors that determine acts' deontic status. But the permissibility of not acting on what there is most moral reason to do, including failing to benefit oneself, is explained more directly, simply, and elegantly in terms of our having a moral power or authority over ourselves rather than in terms of conflicts between two categories of reasons and the relative magnitudes of the reasons within those categories.²³

In fairness, dual-ranking act consequentialism could incorporate the power to exclude one's own good from moral consideration by thinking of this as a second-order reason. Some of our reasons, after all, are reasons rooted in such powers (some moral philosophers would classify these as "reasons of autonomy," etc.). But introducing

²³ See my "Agents, Patients, and Compulsory Self-benefit," section VII, for further details about the powers in question.

second-order reasons threatens to complicate an already complex account of moral permissibility. For the theory must then explain how first-order moral reasons, first-order nonmoral reasons, *and* second-order moral reasons (which in turn shape the role first-order reasons play in determinations both of an agent's all-things-considered reasons and of moral permissibility) relate in such manner as to yield options when moral reasons and all-things-considered reasons diverge. It would be premature to claim that such relations cannot be plausibly elucidated, but some a priori skepticism about that project seems warranted.

6. CONCLUSION: SELF, OTHER, AND DIRECTED OPTIONS

Our discussion has canvassed some, but not all, of the possible consequentialist responses to the compulsory self-benefit objection that attempt to establish the permissibility of not benefitting ourselves. While these responses vary in their shortcomings, their struggles in addressing this objection help illuminate why the objection is troubling for consequentialism.

At its heart, consequentialism stands opposed to actions having fundamentally *directed* deontic status.²⁴ As debates about special obligations indicate, in claiming that our duties rest on bringing about particular outcomes, consequentialism struggles to account for how the performance of our duties can be owed to specific individuals or how failures of duty wrong them. After all, having a duty to a person is crucially different from having a duty to realize some state of affairs. The compulsory self-benefit objection shows that consequentialists similarly struggle to make sense of directed *options*: the permission not to benefit oneself is an option but not one that an agent has with respect to anyone beside herself; that is, she is not at liberty to assign others' good lesser significance in her moral deliberation. A consequentialist response to the compulsory self-benefit objection would therefore need to invoke some sort of asymmetry between oneself and others to make sense of it as an option.

Moreover, as sections 4 and 5 illustrate, the wide breadth of the moral permissibility of not benefitting ourselves implies that consequentialist approaches that try to answer this objection by appealing to the strength of personal (or nonmoral) reasons misrepresent the nature of this permissibility. It rests not on some category of (first-order) reasons whose significance permits us not to benefit ourselves but on a seemingly more basic moral power or right to exclude, to whatever degree an individual sees fit, her good from the deliberative weighing of reasons.

²⁴ See Marcus Hedahl, "The Significance of a Duty's Direction," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 7, no. 3: 1–29, for discussion of deontic directedness.

In sum, then, the compulsory self-benefit objection resists an easy consequentialist answer because it requires much more than simply making sense of nonmaximizing options. In resting on a directed option, it exerts pressure on consequentialists' commitment to impersonality, and in having a wide breadth, it exerts pressure on the fundamental consequentialist assumption that all and only outcomes of actions contribute to their deontic status.