Understanding the Demandingness Objection[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Abstract

My aim in this article is to help us understand and assess the Demandingness Objection to Consequentialism. I first try to motivate the Objection. Then I consider traditional replies. Next I argue that for the Objection to be successful, it must explain which costs are deemed especially demanding and which costs are not, and why morality should be thought to prioritize the former. Finally I consider reasons to doubt that the Objection can successfully meet this challenge.

Keywords

Demandingness Objection, Consequentialism, well-being, ethical theory, morality, normative ethics

Harriet Tubman made between 13 and 19 journeys back and forth from the free North to the Eastern Shore of Maryland to rescue between 70 and 300 people who were enslaved there. Every trip put her life in grave danger. Tubman had sustained a serious head injury as a child, when she herself was enslaved, which caused her to develop livelong attacks of narcolepsy and seizures. This condition obviously made such treacherous journeys significantly more dangerous.

She continued this work even after the Fugitive Slave Laws forced her to travel with the escapees all the way into Canada to avoid the threat of extradition. She would travel only in winter as fewer people were outside and detection less likely, yet the winter weather could be a great hardship for extended outdoor travel into Canada. There were rewards posted for her capture and her description was included, heightening the risk to her of detection and being re-enslaved. And of course her former enslavement, and having her head bashed in by the person who enslaved her, had vividly exposed her to just how awful this would be. And she well knew that the treatment she would receive if recaptured, after having escaped and famously helped others escape, would be dramatically worse. But of course this also gave her a more vivid sense of what she was rescuing people from.

To give one a sense of proximity of danger that she regularly faced, in one instance she was attempting to rescue people in the same town that she herself had formerly been enslaved in. She saw the person who had formerly enslaved her and only managed to escape undetected because she quickly hit upon the plan of pretending that some chickens she was carrying had gotten lose, given her the opportunity to run in the opposite direction from him, purportedly in chase after the chickens. Sometimes Tubman and the people she was helping escape would have to lay low for an extended period when bounty hunters had picked up their trail and then lack of food would become a serious issue.

Later Tubman would work, without assurance of payment, for the Union army fighting for the end of slavery as a spy, scout, and guerrilla soldier. She would regularly successfully slip into territory controlled by the South and get information from enslaved blacks to take back to the Union army. She also worked for the Union Army as a nurse working with those with highly infectious small pox. Later she would regularly put up relatives and homeless in her own home. Toward the end of her life she used what resources she had to start up a home for the indigent. She died nearly penniless in that facility.

Tubman devoted her life to helping those in great need even when it involved extreme hardship, unthinkable danger to herself, and many others were much better positioned to aid. Her life shames us into an acceptance of how very much misery and oppression one can overcome if one is fearless, resolute, smart, resourceful, and compassionate, even if one has few other tools for such a task. To those of us who cower in fear at faculty meetings, unwilling to stick up for someone unjustly maligned, or who are unwilling to part with our creature comforts to prevent children from dying of dehydration, deciding to devote oneself to others to the degree Tubman managed is perhaps literally unimaginable.

Getting the Feel of the Demandingness Objection

Yet she might have done more. Even a life like Tubman’s, which is chosen because it exemplifies unparalleled and selfless service to bending what causal levers were available to her to alleviating misery and suffering, could have been lived in such a way to create even more goodness in the world. Imagine the complaint that Tubman did not adequately respond to the fact that other people’s well-being matters as much as her own. Imagine someone earnestly claiming that Tubman gave herself and her own comfort too much weight during her life to count as morally acceptable. She might, for example, have chosen to rescue people it was easier to reach rather than focus on areas where she had family, and in so doing rescued a few more people. She probably could have squeezed in at least one more trip south to help a few more people escape enslavement.

Plainly such a complaint against Tubman would be outrageous. If Tubman does not measure up to some purported moral standard on the grounds that even she was not giving enough of her time and energy, if even she counts as immorally selfish by its lights, then that moral standard is not suitable for human beings. Consequentialism, because it tends to insist that acts either maximize goodness or are wrong, therefore is not a suitable understanding of morality for human beings. One might well maintain that condemning Tubman as immorally selfish is merely the pinnacle of the mountain of absurdity involved in demanding that agents maximize the good if they are to count as morally acceptable.

Let’s call that broad concern the Demandingness Objection to Consequentialism. Other moral theories might be thought to be too demanding as well, but this concern is thought to apply paradigmatically against Consequentialism and we will consider it only in this context. Of course, friends of the Objection maintain that we can promote the good radically less vigorously than Tubman and still launch a successful demandingness objection against Consequentialism in defense of the moral acceptability of our wildly-short-of-Tubman-levels-of-promotion-of-the-good lifestyle. Friends of the Objection maintain that it can be used to defend the moral acceptability of the lives of ordinary folk, not just moral superheroes.

The case of Tubman, and the outrageous complaint that she did not do enough to count as living a morally acceptable life, is meant to put us in a position to feel the intuitions that animate the Demandingness Objection. Now let’s try to put the intuition into words, that is, formulate an initial general and broad commonsensical handle on the complaint the Objection offers. I think the intuitive thought is something like this: Morality should not take over our lives, at least in most circumstances and certainly not in circumstances such as most of us live in today, but rather will be fully compatible with a wide range of self-directed lives that involve significant devotion to friends, family, and/or projects other than serving morality or the interests of others. Morality, except in very rare circumstances, leaves us plenty of free space to construct a life according to our own lights. The true morality will not dictate the most central and pervasive aspects of our lives. This is why Tubman was certainly not required to do anything like the work she did for others, even if that work was vitally important in making the world contain a much greater amount of goodness. Moral views that claim the only way to be morally acceptable is to fundamentally and thoroughly shape our lives to conform to its demands are mistaken. The true morality, the Objection insists, will reflect the truth that there are a wide range of permissible ways of life that provide the opportunity for people to fashion a life suited to themselves.

This broad, and admittedly in some ways still vague, concern could be fleshed out in various ways. It is so far intended merely as a common creed that different versions of the Objection will make more precise. Demandingness might be measured in different ways. The Objection might be best understood as claiming that a moral regime is unrelentingly demanding to her—it never provides contexts, such as a weekend, where it relaxes its demands. Or it might be that a regime excessively constrains the complier’s options, even if they are not too awful with respect to opportunities for her well-being. Or it might be that the expected costs of a purported moral regime are too high. Such differences can safely be ignored for our purposes here.

We will, however, spend some time later in this article thinking about another difference in understanding the Objection. The problematic issue that the Objection points to might be claimed to be that compliance with an understanding of morality would be too costly to the complying agent in terms of her own well-being. Or it might be that what this moral regime requires is too costly, even if it does not demand all those costs voluntarily of the agent but rather imposes some of them on a person qua patient rather than agent of morality. To see the difference between these options consider the difference between a moral regime requiring that one freely give over one’s kidney oneself as opposed to requiring that other people take your kidney from you. Does the owner of the kidney have an equal demandingness objection against both regimes or is it more powerful against one or the other?

One issue at stake here is whether we want to mark an important difference relevant to understanding the Objection between a “demand” of a moral theory and a more generic “cost” to an agent that results from that theory. One might, for example, say that when a moral theory requires that others take one’s kidney, that moral theory is costly to you but does not demand anything of you since its requirements do not address you qua agent. On this understanding, only costs a moral regime requires of one qua agent count as demands of that regime. The word “demand” plausibly does seem to have such a connotation. However, for the Objection to lean on linguistic aspects of the word “demand” in pressing this distinction threatens to rob the Objection of much of its force unless some moral significance can be given to the distinction between what a theory demands in this sense and what costs it imposes on agents more generally. If the Objection narrows the understanding of “demands” in this way without providing a rationale for thinking such costs are morally prioritized, we should lose interest in the resulting understanding of “demands” in assessing moral theories. We will return below to consider one reason to accord this distinction moral significance—the insistence that morality must provide an agent with strong reasons to comply. This thought might rationalize looking especially at costs imposed on agents when they are being required to act by a moral theory since, on this understanding, such costs cannot in principle get so steep as to make it the case that the agent does not have strong or decisive reasons to comply.

Traditional Lines of Defense from the Objection

Defenders of Consequentialism from the Objection have, sensibly, not been keen to denounce the immoral selfishness and sloth in the service of the good of Tubman. Instead they have developed a Swiss Army knife of replies to the Objection.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here is a quick, and surely incomplete, list of what seem to me the most important such replies: First, Consequentialism is an account of the moral truth-maker, not a decision procedure. Thus morality does not require that we keep our eye on the task of promoting aggregate utility. Because of this, it is sometimes suggested, lives that are not obsessed with or self-consciously focused on aiding other people can be morally acceptable.[[3]](#footnote-3) Second, most who make no or little time for friends and loved ones, because such time and energy would siphon off resources that could create more goodness elsewhere, tend to burn out in the long-term and become ineffective in promoting the good.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus the wise promoter of goodness, who recognizes human weaknesses and their own susceptibility to it, will not deprive themselves of such support. And this will require devoting time and energy into sustaining friendships so that they can sustain you. Third, various alternative forms of consequentialism, be it rule, motive, cooperative scheme or whatever, will reveal a less demanding, and partly for that reason, more compelling form of the view.[[5]](#footnote-5) Fourth, morality only requires that we produce enough of the aggregate well-being, or goodness, we might create, perhaps 70 percent. Satisficing rather than maximizing versions of Consequentialism will be more tolerably demanding.

Fifth, scalar forms of Consequentialism deny that there is a cut off line of permissibility, but rather only better and worse moral options. If we accept this we will see that Consequentialism makes no “demands” at all and thus could not be too demanding.[[6]](#footnote-6) Sixth, some Consequentialists might join some virtue ethicists in maintaining that lives that sacrifice moral excellence cannot do so to the genuine prudential advantage of the agent making such decisions. If it really were true that the best life for one’s own well-being was the morally best life, then seemingly demanding moral theories, if otherwise true, are not asking for a sacrifice of the agent’s well-being. In a sense, the thought is, it is prudence that is demanding, not morality.[[7]](#footnote-7) And obviously prudence is not demanding in the coin of well-being, which might well be thought that most salient coin of demandingness.[[8]](#footnote-8) Seventh, others maintain that the best version of consequentialist morality only requires that we do our fair share to make the world contain as much good as possible. If so, morality’s demands would look much less demanding and much more like we are used to.[[9]](#footnote-9) Eighth, even if Tubman’s life was not, at all points, morally acceptable, saying or even thinking as much is unjustifiable by the true moral standard. Indeed, the only attitude permissible towards Tubman is praise and admiration. The true consequentialist will measure the moral appropriateness of the reactive attitudes and their expression by considering if such expressions themselves maximize goodness. Given how little more Tubman might have done, and how much more many others might do, and how unlikely we are to persuade many to do anything remotely as onerous as Tubman, blaming Tubman will turn people off the project of adhering to morality and cost more goodness than it produces. It would be expedient in terms of promoting the good to lavish praise on the efforts of Tubman and immoral to denounce her as immoral.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Ninth, still others suggest that concerning ourselves with only our own sphere of friends and family will, most of the time and in ordinary circumstances, in fact be the best way to produce the most overall utility. Because we are closer to these causal levers and more knowledgeable about what in fact would benefit people we are close to, focusing on those one knows well will often be the best way to produce the most good.[[11]](#footnote-11) Tenth, some distinguish objective and subjective compliance with morality’s demands. Subjective compliance is secured when, given one’s information, one does the best one reasonably could by way of making the world a better place. If one does that, yet fails to in fact maximize goodness, one is not thereby blameworthy as blameworthiness is tied to subjective failings. Eleventh, some point out that in a world without slavery and with a much more egalitarian distribution of wealth, the demands of Consequentialism would be greatly diminished and the occasions in which one’s doting on oneself and one’s inner circle would maximize goodness would be greatly expanded. The great demands of Consequentialism are a result of the great evils and inequality in the actual world, not intrinsic to the view. Such people will encourage us to blame the state of the world, or those who have created the modern horrors, not Consequentialism, for the demands of morality in this world.

Twelfth, others point out that many cases in which Consequentialism seems very demanding are cases where the vast majority of people in a position to aid are not doing their fair share to promote the good. If others would do their fair share, the burden on each person would be greatly reduced. We should not blame Consequentialism for the great burdens that fall on the few who will listen to morality. The blame is properly directed at those not doing their share. Thirteenth, we must distinguish between something being morally required of X and some Y being entitled to force X to do that thing. Consequentialist can allow that moral obligations can exist even when no one entitled to enforce them. In such cases one might say the burden is too demanding to be enforceable, even if it is still a moral demand on one. This would be an attempt to reinterpret the demandingness worry as a political rather than moral worry.

Broadly speaking, and with some exceptions, these responses primarily aim only to show that the correct understanding of Consequentialism is not so demanding that we should denounce Tubman as immorally self-centered. The replies try to make room to think that Consequentialism is more demanding than mainstream understandings of morality, but not so extremely demanding as to be obviously unacceptable. Broadly, and with exceptions, the typical Consequentialist reaction to the Objection is to accept that there is some truth to the charge of the Objection but to try to mitigate the damage to the view with the above maneuvers.

Without meaning to cast doubt on the truth of any of these replies, or to endorse any of them, I would like to confront the Demandingness Objection in a different way. I want to query how we should understand what it is to be demanding in the first place and why it should be thought that morality is not demanding in that sense. We need to understand the Objection better before we can see how the Consequentialist might best attempt to respond.

The Ambitions of the Demandingness Objection

But before getting to that I need to say a few words about how I will be understanding the ambitions of the Objection, as that plays a crucial role in my concerns about its success. An unambitious understanding of the Objection would have it merely claim that Consequentialism claims some things are morally required when our intuitions maintain that such options are merely permissible and not required. And on this basis the unambitious interpretation would conclude only that this is some reason to doubt that Consequentialism is correct in those claims about what is required. The unambitious understanding is fully compatible with the thought that, for example, our demandingness intuitions are sensitive to the truth that there are non-Consequentialist rights people have that prevent some options that Consequentialism thinks are required from being required or that there is a morally important difference between causing and allowing that Consequentialism misses and that our intuitions of demandingness are picking up on cases where Consequentialism is inappropriately holding us equally accountable for things we allow as for things we cause.

This unambitious understanding of the Objection is compatible with the idea that our demandingness intuitions merely signal the existence of some other, fundamental, problem with Consequentialism and that the experience of excessive demandingness is downstream from the genuine and fundamental problems for the view. On this view, the Demandingness Intuitions are not insisted to be more than merely an epistemic guide to finding the real problem with Consequentialism which is more fundamental than, and explains, our intuitions about excessive demandingness.

A more ambitious understanding of the Objection would have it maintain that a crucial problem with Consequentialism is that it fails to accept that the true morality is not excessively demanding. This understanding maintains that we can understand the level of demandingness of a moral theory significantly independently of a commitment to a particular moral outlook and assess the adequacy of that moral outlook on the basis of how demanding it is. On this understanding, our demandingness intuitions don’t merely signal or track some possibly independent fundamental problem with Consequentialism, but rather the Objection is a self-standing and independent objection to Consequentialism. Hereafter I will only be addressing the more ambitious version of the Objection. It is this understanding, I believe, that most who pressed the Objection and most who defended Consequentialism from it have had in mind.

Towards Understanding the Demandingness Objection

In paradigmatic types of cases in which people feel the pull of the demandingness objection, there is a purported moral requirement that X aid Y that is felt to be excessively demanding on X. For concreteness, let’s imagine a situation in which Sally non-culpably needs Harry’s kidney. Harry can live without this kidney, Sally cannot. Still, most who champion the Objection would claim that this purported requirement on Harry to give over the kidney is excessively demanding on Harry and so not a genuine moral requirement.[[12]](#footnote-12) Let’s suppose this requirement would count as excessively demanding in the sense that the Objection is pressing. With that supposition in place, we can look at features of the case to try to help us more precisely interpret what it means to say that something is too demanding.

Obviously, in our above scenario, the costs to Sally of Harry’s failure to give over the kidney are larger than the costs to Harry of doing so. But no one would for a second maintain that Sally has a Demandingness Objection against a moral regime that permits Harry to not hand over the kidney. When we are in the grips of the Demandingness Objection intuitions, we are focused on costs to the aider and not on the larger costs that would befall the potential recipient of aid if they were not aided. Only because this is how we are thinking of what is and is not demanding does it appear that Consequentialism is more demanding than some non-Consequentialist moral regime in cases of this sort. If the costs of what a moral theory permits to befall the unaided were thought just as demanding as costs a moral theory imposes on someone by requiring them to aid, then, in our examples, the Demandingness Objections would be levelled more forcefully against the non-Consequentialist moral views that do not require that the aid be provided.

Thus, a crucial part of clarifying the Objection’s notion of what is and is not demanding must involve the Objection prioritizing some costs that would result from a moral regime over other such costs. I want to pause and underline this point. I think the lack of attention to this point has damaged much of the discussion of the Objection. Any potential vindication of the Objection must maintain that not all costs of a purported moral regime are on a par in their demandingness. Some types of costs that result from a purported moral regime must be maintained to be more demanding than others even when costs of other types are larger. If you take only one lesson from this paper, let it be this: friends of the Objection must specify which types of costs are properly prioritized by the Objection. And they must then address the question of why morality, properly understood, should prioritize such costs.

So any potential vindication of the Objection must address the question of which types of cost are especially demanding. The claim that all types of costs count as equally demanding will not get the result friends of the Objection are looking for in paradigmatic cases where people feel the force of the Objection. Further, that no one presses the Demandingness Objection on Sally’s behalf but only on Harry’s behalf, despite the costs to the former being larger, is an important clue in how to understand what is, and is not, seen as especially demanding by the Objection.

Potential Problems for Understandings of Which Costs are Especially Demanding

Whatever costs the Objection prioritizes as especially demanding face a series of questions which have the potential to diminish the Objection from playing the role it is typically thought to be able to play. Here I will just mention a few such questions. Later we will press these questions on various interpretations of the costs prioritized by the Objection. The interpretations offered in this section are not mentioned because they are especially plausible interpretations of which costs are prioritized by the Objection. Rather they are selected because they especially clearly illustrate a potential problem that could arise for other, more plausible, understanding of which costs are prioritized by the Objection.

Some possible understandings of the costs prioritized by the Objection would reveal the Objection to be downstream of the important criticisms of, or fundamental break with, Consequentialism. For example, suppose the costs prioritized by the Objection were costs involved in doing what one is morally permitted but not required or forbidden to do. That is, we first figure out what options morality requires one to do and which options are not required. Then we assign higher demandingness to costs a person bares in doing things she is permitted but not required or forbidden to do. So if Harry is permitted but not required to give over his kidney, then costs associated with giving it over would count as especially demanding. If Sue is required to return the money she borrowed, the costs to her of doing so are not prioritized by the Objection. If Pei Lin is not permitted to steal Yousef’s car, the costs to her of not doing so are not prioritized, on this picture, as demanding.

This understanding of the costs that are especially demanding would obviously reveal the Objection to not be the fundamental critique of Consequentialism. For on this understanding of what makes costs especially demanding, the Objection is forced to presuppose that Consequentialism is incorrect as a premise in its account of which costs are and are not demanding. The Objection, in this case, would be riding the coat tails of a previous break with Consequentialism, not itself providing the rationale to break with it. Call this the Redundancy Worry. In the above case it is transparent that the Redundancy Worry applies. However, in the case of some more plausible interpretations of which costs are prioritized as especially demanding, there can be non-transparent Redundancy Worries.

Second, suppose the costs that are prioritized are just any costs an agent has the power to avoid paying. That is, if morality purportedly requires Superman to wait in line but he can zoom to the front and no one can stop him or impose costs on him for doing so, then such costs on Superman count as especially demanding. On this interpretation of what is demanding, it might seem that the Objection is here engaged in a kind of negotiation with people who especially have the power to resist the call of morality without harm to themselves. If it were thought that people care somewhat to be moral and to be seen to be moral but tend to be reluctant to significantly sacrifice their own well-being or what they care about, it might be wise for a moral regime to diminish what it asks of such people who can relatively costlessly revolt against morality. The thought might be that if we ask for all that morality in fact requires, we will get less out of people who are significantly self-interested and in a position to resist costs imposed by morality. Better, from the moral point of view, to purport that morality requires less of people in such a situation so that we get what we can out of them. And of course, on this interpretation, in some contexts some of us are relevantly like Superman and in other contexts we are not. That is, in some contexts some of our actions are difficult to detect or performed before people poorly positioned to effectively object and other of our actions are not.

This understanding of what is demanding would reveal the Objection to not be in genuine conflict with Consequentialism. Consequentialism is an account of the truth-maker of moral claims and only indirectly takes a stand on what moral requirements it is wise to publicly announce.

Alternatively, and depending on our own theory of reasons for action, this understanding of the costs that are especially demanding might just reflect which costs we think an agent has reason to pay, rather than which costs morality requires. If we reject a moral rationalism which claims that people always have most reason to do what morality requires, there can be cases where morality requires X but the agent lacks most reason to X. The demandingness objection might register the thought that the agent lacks a powerful reason to comply, not that morality does not ask them to comply. So understood, it would seem the Objection would not tell against Consequentialism as a moral theory. Call these two thoughts the Not an Objection to Consequentialism Worry.

Third, suppose the costs prioritized by the Objection were costs just to people who are well enough off that they are frequently in a position to aid others. That is, any cost to any such person is seen as especially demanding. In this case we would be right to worry that the Objection is merely protecting the privileges of the privileged and unconsciously responding to the morally inappropriate sense that somehow high-status people are more morally important than other people. In this case we would likely psychologize the intuition, perhaps by suggesting that either the people whose intuitions were consulted were those of people already so privileged, expected to become so, or sought to curry favor with (or avoid the wrath of) the privileged.[[13]](#footnote-13) Alternatively, we might wonder if society has managed to deceive even non-privileged people to unconsciously react as if the privileged mattered more by telling stories that focus on the heroism and self-made nature of the well to do and the debased nature and deserved status of the poorly off. With this interpretation of which costs count as especially demanding, we ought not find the Objection so understood to be morally compelling. Call this the Affluenza is Contagious Worry.

Which Costs are Especially Demanding?

I now want to consider a few candidates for the sort of costs best prioritized as especially demanding by the Objection. Obviously I will not be able to consider every possible understanding of which costs are especially demanding and how prioritizing such costs fares with respect to all the types of challenges I mentioned above. Rather I will consider what seem to me the most plausible such understandings I can think of and consider the most pressing problems for each stemming from the type of worries raised in the previous section.

We will consider two possible understandings of which costs are prioritized by the Objection. Let’s start by considering the view that the costs that are especially demanding are what I will call active compliance costs. These are costs to the actor in her voluntarily doing what is purported to be a moral requirement.[[14]](#footnote-14) This proposal would explain our sense that the costs of requiring a person to give over her kidney generate a powerful demanding objection against such a requirement but costs to the person who would die if the kidney is not given over do not similarly generate as powerful of a demandingness objection, despite the costs to the latter being higher. More generally, this understanding of what costs are especially demanding would explain why our demandingness intuitions are much more sensitive to costs to the potential aider than to the person who would suffer greater costs if left unaided.

There are a variety of concerns to have about this proposal. I want first to list those concerns and then offer what I think is the best response to such worries. So, to begin let’s consider the worries about the proposal. First, it is odd to ignore benefits that flow to the person qua patient of a moral regime. If an agent is better off overall under a moral regime, but pays higher compliance costs compared to a rival moral regime, it is odd to think of that moral regime as more demanding on that agent such that the agent has a stronger complaint against it than against a rival moral regime which would leave her, all in, worse off. It is odd to say that a moral system is too demanding on one when one would be better off under that moral system than under any rival moral system. Second, we must wonder what to think of costs imposed on one by a moral regime qua patient. Can I launch a Demandingness Objection against a moral regime that requires others to take my kidney? If not, is there some other complaint to lodge, such as a failure to respect my rights, which should not be thought of as part of the Objection? Making this a separate complaint threatens to make the Objection seem rather narrow. Third, prioritizing active compliance costs responds to the thought that morality ought not take over our lives. However, it suggests that it is more morally important that morality not take over our lives than that disease and famine not do so. This priority seems morally suspect and, contrary to what I would expect morality’s priority to be, tailored to suit the powerful rather than the needy.

Fourth, one rationale for prioritizing active compliance costs is because these are costs a person must voluntarily impose upon themselves. And if such costs are too high, people may well choose to not impose them on themselves. Thus we may do better in terms of the bottom line if we lower the costs of people feeling like they are adequately responsive to moral concerns. This is a strategic move, not one generated by intrinsic moral considerations. This should remind us of one variant of “Not an Objection to Consequentialism” above, Fifth, it is more obvious that an agent’s reasons are especially responsive to costs to her that she can choose to avoid than that morality is especially responsive to such costs. It is widely accepted that one has special reasons to be partial to oneself. Indeed, many maintain that one can have sufficient reasons of partiality to rationalize doing so over the requirements of morality. What is much less clear is that morality itself provides some ground to prioritize costs to the deliberating agent over larger costs to others. Again we might think what we are responding to when we feel the Demandingness Intuitions is that the agent does not have a strong reason to comply with morality, rather than thinking that morality does not really require it. This should remind us of the other variant of “Not an Objection to Consequentialism” above.

Sixth, the simplest way to overcome the Objection on this understanding is simply to impose fewer active compliance costs and greater passive compliance costs. That is, stop asking people to give over their own kidney voluntarily and start asking people to forcibly take another person’s kidney. If a moral regime stops asking us each to voluntarily turn over our kidneys and instead asks us each to forcibly take the other person’s kidney, that moral regime will, on this understanding of demandingness, greatly reduce its demandingness. But the latter, purportedly less demanding, views seems plainly a less good moral view. Such a view seems all in worse and to not have an important virtue compared to the version that imposes such requirements on us as agents. It is a bad sign if we significantly reduce the demandingness of a moral regime on an understanding of demandingness, keep it otherwise as similar as possible, and thereby make the moral regime worse. That is a sign that this understanding of what costs are demanding are not getting at a very morally significant complaint against a moral view.

Seventh, if a competent person voluntarily and under no duress makes a bunch of contractual promises to aid people this surely diminishes their ability to complain about the demandingness of a moral theory that requires them to live up to those promises. However it does not seem the proposal under consideration can make room for this thought. The active compliance costs of aiding others, even after you have freely promised to do so, is just as high as it would have been had one not promised. Thus it seems on this proposal the size of the demandingness complaint a person can make against being required to aid is implausibly unaffected by her free promise to do so. Surely one cannot run around making lots of uncoerced promises to help people and then legitimately complain about the demandingness of a morality that would require one to keep one’s word.

Now let’s consider the best reply to some, but not all, of the above concerns. Fiona Woollard has helpfully pointed out that the focus on avoidable costs to the moral agent of complying with purported moral demands could be understood to reflect the thought that “morality should be such that it is generally reasonable to expect an agent to choose to conform to it. The demandingness objection charges that the target theories do not meet this condition.”[[15]](#footnote-15) If some rationale for a kind of moral rationalism that forges a strong connection between an agent’s reasons and what morality asks of her could be provided, several of the above concerns might be significantly allayed.[[16]](#footnote-16) Let’s call this the Rationalism Rejoinder.

I have two main responses to the Rationalism Rejoinder. First, it is crucial to note that this response needs to rely on more than just there being such a strong connection between an agent’s reasons and what morality asks. It also needs to assume a particular picture of what sorts of things an agent has reason to do. If a pure subjective view about reasons were correct, and agents only have reason to do what furthers their contingent ends, the strong connection between reasons and morality will look much less plausible.[[17]](#footnote-17) On the other hand if we have powerful reasons to promote what is objectively good, our reasons might be quite demanding themselves. If subjective accounts are false, it may be that one has powerful reason to sacrifice significantly for others, at least when others are in desperate need and one can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable importance. Alternatively, one might think that whatever the content of the true morality, we have very strong reasons to obey it. This would make our reasons bend to what morality independently requires, blocking the claim that morality must bend to accommodate our reasons.

More broadly, the persuasiveness of this sort of defense of the Objection requires a kind of confidence in a theory of reasons which is partial enough to vindicate the Objection but not so selfish that something deserving the name morality cannot accommodate itself to it. The move under consideration here requires not only that morality typically provides such reasons, but also that an agent’s reasons are especially responsive to costs to herself, even when countervailing moral considerations are in play. Some forms of rationalism, or the insistence of a tight connection between one’s reasons and what morality requires, will, as it were, elevate one’s reasons to morality. Others will cut morality down to what one has reason to do. For the response here to work it needs to have something closer to the latter structure. The response here must assume a rather partial picture of what one has reason to do together with a strong connection between one’s reasons and the requirements of morality. I think these two components are less tempting in conjunction than either is separately.

My second reply to the Rationalism Rejoinder is that it still seems vulnerable to the Redundancy Worry. Consider a case where a non-Consequentialist moral regime prohibits a person from taking another person’s kidney without that other person’s consent, even though the agent will die if she does not take it. As we are currently measuring demandingness, such an agent has a very powerful Demandingness Objection against this moral regime based in the fact that her complying with the regime would be extremely costly to her. Presumably, however, the friend of the Rationalism Rejoinder still wants to get the result that despite such a strong Demandingness Objection against this requirement, the agent is not all-in permitted to take the kidney. The only way I see to get this result is to somehow maintain that the force of the reasons morality provides to not take the kidney outweigh the force of the Objection in such cases. But to get this result, together with the result that agents are permitted to not give their kidney in such situations, it must be presupposed that morality provides stronger reasons against causing the loss of a kidney than it provides against allowing a person to die unaided from a lack of a kidney—that is, to presuppose a strong version of the causing/allowing distinction. Thus the resurfacing of the Redundancy Worry.

A second way we could think of the costs that the Objection might champion as especially demanding would be to prioritize costs that are required by a moral regime whether those costs fall on people in their role of agent or as patient of the regime. On this picture costs of being required to, qua agent, voluntarily give over one’s kidney and costs to Y when a moral regime requires X to take Y’s kidney without Y’s consent would both count as especially demanding. But if both such costs are prioritized, what costs are demoted in significance on the demandingness scale? For some costs to be prioritized, other costs must be diminished in importance.

This picture would downgrade the moral significance of costs permitted but not required by a moral regime.[[18]](#footnote-18) So if a moral regime required someone to lose a kidney the costs associated with that loss would count as especially demanding but if it only permitted someone to die from a lack of a kidney, rather than requiring that action be taken to prevent that result, the cost of that lack would not be prioritized by the Objection. In this way the Objection could again prioritize costs to the aider or the person who others are required to use as a mean in aiding, but would downplay the costs of those who will go unaided if the moral theory does not require the aid to be given. This, at first blush, has the right shape to vindicate the traditional focus on costs to those required to aid and relative downplaying of costs that will result to those who the theory permits to go unaided.

And this suggestion fits well with the name of the Objection, the “Demandingness” Objection. Costs permitted by a moral regime but not required do not count as “demanded” by that moral theory. And so this is a second reason to think this proposal a plausible interpretation of the costs best understood as prioritized by the Objection. Further, this proposal is less plausibly interpreted as merely a pragmatic bargain with the agent or responding to that agent’s reasons rather than a moral assessment. The suspicion that we are talking about the agent’s reasons rather than morality arises especially in contexts where we are fixated on costs to the acting agent.

So, having motivated this interpretation, let’s begin to assess it. The first and most important thing to say here is that this distinction between costs required and costs permitted looks a lot like the causing/allowing distinction adjusted so as to assess moral theories rather than agents. Moral regimes don’t cause stuff. But they can require stuff. And in a morally ideal world such requirements would affect people’s behavior. Moral regimes also tolerate stuff by not requiring what would be needed to prevent it. The current proposal supposes this distinction is morally significant. One way of arriving at such a view might be to say things like: if a moral regime permits X to occur we should not think the regime necessarily is in favor of X or should be held responsible for X. But if it requires that X occur then it does seem that in some sense the regime is in favor of X and, should people respond to the requirement appropriately, could legitimately be thought responsible in part for X. And it might seem more appropriate to count such costs against a regime when that regime is for those costs being paid and partly responsible for them being paid.

Such thoughts may be sensible, I will not here argue that they are not, but they are the same sort of thoughts that lead people to mark a moral distinction between costs caused by X and costs allowed by X. After all, in such cases, we might say that in cases where X merely allows stuff they need not be for such costs or responsible for them. That is to say, the same sort of thoughts that might lead one to mark a distinction between costs caused vs allowed by agents are the thoughts that might lead one to mark a distinction between costs required and permitted by a moral regime, and to morally prioritize the former over the latter.

Thus I think that the move of prioritizing costs required by a moral theory and downplaying the costs allowed presupposes a fundamental and familiar sort of break with Consequentialism in how it measures demandingness. And the distinction between causing and allowing or requiring and permitting is, I submit, plainly an independent break with Consequentialism. Thus the fundamental break with Consequentialism is independent of and downstream from worries about demandingness. This is, obviously, just an instance of the broader Redundancy Worry we saw above.

Obviously some ways we might reject Consequentialism, such as by marking a morally crucial distinction between causing and allowing and maintaining that we are less morally accountable for what we allow than for what we cause, will imply that any view like Consequentialism, which maintains that we are just as accountable for what we allow, is therefore too demanding with respect to what we may allow. But that worry about demandingness will just be a trivial entailment of a prior and independent ground for rejecting the view.

Conclusion

A persuasive version of the Demandingness Objection must successfully perform three crucial tasks. First, it must tell us which costs it is prioritizing as especially demanding. Only if the Objection prioritizes some costs over other larger costs can it hope to vindicate the claim that Consequentialist theories are especially demanding, as we saw in the kidney example. Second, it must persuade us that such costs are morally prioritized. And third it must not presuppose prior and independent breaks from Consequentialism in measuring the demandingness of an ethical theory. Until proponents of the Objection have offered us a persuasive understanding of the Objection that addresses the above, I maintain that we should reject Consequentialism independently of the Objection or not at all. Until we are offered such an understanding of the Objection, the Objection itself does not provide a good reason to reject Consequentialism. In my view, full recognition of these burdens in successfully defending the Objection have only relatively recently been acknowledged and responded to. We may be in the infancy of our understanding of the Objection.[[19]](#footnote-19)

1. I have previously written on this topic in my “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection,” *Philosophers’ Imprint*, Sept., 2007 (also collected in my *From Valuing to Value*, OUP, 2017). I continue to accept what I wrote back then. A few points from the earlier work are again insisted upon here. However this article is not intended as an update of, or to replace, that earlier paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Not all of these replies make a direct case against the Objection. They do not all make a case that morality, properly understood, may take over our lives in the way the Objection denies. Rather some of them try to persuade us that Consequentialism can find various other ways successfully to give vent to our most powerful intuitions in the neighborhood of the demandingness objection in ways that relieve the degree of conflict with commonsense. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While many have defended the claim that Consequentialism is best understood as a truth-maker rather than a decision procedure, I find the discussion in Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1984, especially forceful. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 2. (Spring, 1984), forcefully defended such thoughts. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, Clarendon Press, 2000, has suggested that part of the rationale for looking to rule views is to avoid the demandingness objection. However he is not committed to the idea that the resulting view remains an instance of Consequentialism. In one sense it is not really a defense of Consequentialism from the demandingness objection to urge us to reject Consequentialism and move to a different view. It does, however, show that one accords the objection real force. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alistair Norcross argues for such a view in his *Morality by Degrees: Reasons Without Demands*, forthcoming, OUP. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It would be interesting to consider the force of a Demandingness Objection against a theory of prudence. Could one similarly complain that a purported prudential regime took over one’s life and provided insufficient freedom to fashion a life of one’s own choosing? Perhaps alienation concerns about some objectivist theories of well-being could, within the bounds of tolerable revision, be understood along these lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, OUP, 1999, for example, has argued that a virtuous life is always prudentially recommended, given one’s epistemic situation, even if in some rare and unlikely cases such virtuous lives can turn out to not be good for the person who lives them. I take issue with such a view in David Copp and David Sobel, “Morality and Virtue,” *Ethics* 114 (April 2004): 514-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Non-Ideal Theory*, OUP, 2000, argues for such a position. It is not entirely clear to me if he thinks of the resulting view as still an instance of Consequentialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Peter Singer and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*, OUP, 2015, chapter 11, have argued in this direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mill unconvincingly suggests this reply in *Utilitarianism*, Hackett Publishing, 2001. Given the ease with which resources and information today can move about the world and the wildly inegalitarian distribution of resources together with desperate need that it takes little insider information to understand how to fix, this suggestion seems incorrect about the world we in fact live in even if it could be correct about some possible worlds, including some worlds that were actual in the past. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I used this example in my “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John Harris “The Survival Lottery,” *Philosophy*, 50 (1975), pp. 81-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Understanding what we are trying to measure here is not trivial. Seemingly if there are costs involved in not doing what is purportedly morally required, such as costs of ill-will from one’s neighbors, incarceration, or maybe even guilt, this should be thought to reduce the size of the compliance costs of complying. That is, the best understanding of the size of such costs seems to involve a comparison between what would happen if one complied and what would happen if one did not. Thus larger costs involved in failing to comply would reduce the relevant compliance costs. If that is right, perversely the compliance costs involved of living up to morality in a highly moralistic and surveillance-ridden society go down. If so, then the demands of Consequentialism in a society that stands willing to detect and punish those who do not effectively further the good would be smaller. There would thus be different ways to reduce the demandingness of Consequentialism to acceptable levels, only some of which changes what the theory requires of agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Fiona Woollard, “Dimensions of Demandingness,” 2016, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Vol. cxvi, Part 1, p. 94. See also Brian McElwee, ‘What is Demandingness?’, In Marcel van Ackeren and Michael Ku ̈hler (eds.), *The Limits of Moral Obligation*, New York: Routledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For my favorite type of argument for such moral rationalism see Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint*, 2006, Harvard University Press, p. 98 and Doug Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 2011, OUP. I consider this line of thought in my “Subjectivism and Blame,” in *Reasons to be Moral Revisited*, eds. Sam Black and Evan Tiffany, *The* *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 33, 2009, p. 149-170. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I have argued towards subjectivism about reasons in “The Case for Stance Dependent Reasons,” forthcoming in *JESP*; “Subjective Accounts of Reasons for Action,” *Ethics* 111 (April 2011); and “Subjectivism and Idealization,” *Ethics* 119 (January 2009). These, and other papers in this vein, are collected in my *From Valuing to Value*, OUP, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Liam Murphy explicitly endorses such a proposal. See his excellent general discussion of such issues in *Moral Demands in Non-Ideal Theory*, OUP, 2000. I reply at length to Murphy’s argument for this position in my “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Doug Portmore offered me really helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)