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MORAL DEMANDINGNESS AND MODAL DEMANDINGNESS

Kyle York

Moral demandingness is best understood as a modal feature of moral theories. In other words, we usually ought to evaluate the demandingness of moral theories in a way that includes how demanding those theories are in other (perhaps all) possible worlds. Once we come to see that this is the right way of evaluating a theory's demandingness, however, we will come to find that evaluating the overall demandingness of moral theories is very difficult. In particular, we will lose our confidence that even commonsense morality can avoid charges of being extremely demanding. Rather than undermining commonsense morality, these considerations will undermine the tenability of a certain sort of demandingness objection, which I will call *cost based* (as opposed to *reasons based*). Without being able to justifiably appeal to costs per se, I will suggest that we can object to theories only in terms of the reasons they give us for incurring those costs. I will start by explaining more clearly what I have in mind when I use these terms. For simplicity, I will focus on demandingness objections made against maximizing act consequentialism, though my same points will apply to cost-based objections made against any moral theory or principle, including deontological and virtue-ethical ones.[1]

By cost-based demandingness objections, I am not talking about demandingness objections that are based upon the costs as opposed to, say, the difficulty or restrictiveness of following some moral theory.[2] I am happy to stick with the tradition of understanding demandingness in terms of the costs of following some theory. But demandingness objections can be lodged on the basis of the fact that following some theory is either (1) too costly relative to the reasons that an agent has for incurring those costs or (2) too costly in terms of crossing a fixed threshold of acceptable costliness. Demandingness objections of type 2 are what I call "cost-based" demandingness objections. They are the sort that I am targeting.

1 See, for example, Fragnière, "Climate Change and Individual Duties," 805–6; and Sin, "The Demandingness of Confucianism in the Case of Long-Term Caregiving," 166–79.

2 For discussions of such accounts of demandingness, see Chappell, "Willpower Satisficing," 251–65; and van Ackeren, "How Morality Becomes Demanding," 315–34.

The other kind of demandingness objections—type 1—I refer to as *reasons-based* demandingness objections. Unlike cost-based demandingness objections, reasons-based demandingness objections have flexible thresholds of acceptable costs that shift for various reasons. I wish to define this type only in broad terms. It likely admits of different subtypes or specifications, depending on how one views the proper proportionality between costs and reasons, the proper means of aggregating reasons, and so on. For example, a theory requiring me to donate my eyes to someone who would get more utility out of them might be called "too demanding" in the reasons-based sense. This is apparently because I have some legitimate reason to favor myself in such a case. On the other hand, as one reviewer has pointed out, a theory may also be too demanding by asking an agent to sacrifice his life in exchange for everyone in the world getting a free latte, even if the exchange would result in a substantial overall gain in utility. This would also count as a "reasons-based" demandingness objection, though it might appeal to, say, principles of aggregating costs.[3] As an aside, while these terms are my own, the distinction is not. Sarah Stroud, for example, differentiates the view that "whether a given moral demand is acceptable varies with the *reason* offered in support of the demand" from the view that there are certain costs that agents simply cannot be morally required to bear, also finding the latter view to be unviable.[4]

For my prototype of the cost-based demandingness objection, I borrow from Brian McElwee's "pure-demandingness objection," which he contrasts with objections based upon the "insufficient importance," "wrong moral ranking," or "wrong overall ranking" of moral demands relative to other relevant considerations.[5] McElwee has formulated the "pure demandingness objection" (which, for consistency, I will refer to as the "cost-based demandingness objection") as follows:

> The purported moral considerations in favour of doing *A*, which genuinely are moral considerations and potentially of sufficient importance to generate a moral obligation, are not outweighed by any moral or nonmoral considerations speaking against doing *A*, but nonetheless are insufficient in context to generate a moral obligation, because the cost to the agent is too great.[6]

3 Compare Temkin, "A 'New' Principle of Aggregation," 218–34.

4 Stroud, "They Can't Take That Away from Me," 228. See also Hooker, "The Demandingness Objection."

5 McElwee, "Demandingness Objections in Ethics," 88–92.

6 McElwee, "Demandingness Objections in Ethics," 90–91. This might be slightly confusing, since presumably many of the nonmoral considerations that may render an act

We will take the cost to the agent being too great here in terms of that cost having crossed a fixed threshold of acceptability. I focus on this formulation not because I think that this is the best version of the demandingness objection—quite the opposite. As my argument will show, it seems like only the reasons-based version of the demandingness objection is viable.[7] In other words, I will argue against objections to moral theories that appeal merely to those theories' costliness per se (defined in terms of crossing some threshold of acceptable costs).

My argument should also have some additional, further-reaching implications for the demandingness debate. Traditionally, the sorts of costs taken to be relevant to moral demandingness were those costs related to moral requirements. That is, demandingness objections usually take aim at what some moral theory requires, particularly concerning our duties of beneficence, as opposed to what it permits or forbids. For example, if a theory implies that you must donate one of your kidneys to a needy stranger, you might object that it is for that reason too demanding. It is not traditional, however, to object to moral theories on the grounds of the opportunity costs incurred because of those theories' restrictions. For example, it would be highly unusual to think that a demandingness objection could succeed against a moral theory because that theory restricts me from murdering someone for their liver, even if I need a new liver to survive.

Shelly Kagan and David Sobel have attacked demandingness objections on this very point. They have asked why, if moral theories (like consequentialism) can be criticized over the costs associated with their requirements, should not those critics' own (say, commonsense) moral theories be similarly objected to on grounds of the costs associated with their permissions or restrictions.[8] This would turn the potential success of the (cost-based) demandingness objection into a pyrrhic victory for most of those who would use it. The commonsense moral theorist, however, still has a significant opportunity to push back by pointing to significant differences between restrictions, permissions, and requirements.[9] A modal view of demandingness, however, might sidestep this issue

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supererogatory just are costs to the agent. But as long as we take "nonmoral considerations" to denote everything except costs, McElwee articulates an important formulation of the demandingness objection that avoids concerns about the justifications of demands.

7 Some might think that the cost-based formulation of the demandingness objection represents only a fringe view, which would admittedly make my arguments considerably less interesting. I respond to this concern in the first part of the "Objections" section below.

8 Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, 19–24; and Sobel, "The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection," 238–60.

9 See, for example, Chappell, "Willpower Satisficing," 251–65. Chappell defends satisficing consequentialism in this article, but his argument about the ostensive differences between restrictions and requirements, regarding demandingness, could easily be taken up by any commonsense theorist.

by suggesting that even the requirements of commonsense morality are very demanding. This will not be to suggest that they are as demanding as, say, maximizing act utilitarianism, but they nonetheless might be demanding enough to undermine the commonsense theorist's capacity to raise the objection. To see how, let us first consider why a general understanding of demandingness makes the most sense. This will set the stage for introducing a modal understanding later.

1. General Demands and Contingent Demandingness

Imagine that I live in a village and that everyone in the village has agreed to take turns keeping watch at night. Whoever is keeping watch, it is agreed, must alert the other villagers of attackers by blowing a horn, even though blowing this horn will draw the attention of the attackers and put the guard's life at the greatest risk. Attackers are very rare. The following moral principle seems very plausible: any villager who has entered into this agreement incurs a moral obligation to blow the horn if she is on guard duty and sees attackers. But we run into a problem here. In any particular instance when a guard actually sees attackers, there are *prima facie* grounds for that guard to make a demandingness objection to this moral principle. After all, the principle seems to require her to risk her very life.

But clearly, someone on guard duty who sees attackers coming cannot base a convincing demandingness objection on the costs that she now faces. After all, this is the exact sort of cost that the guard agreed to take on if the occasion arose, and everyone is depending on her for their lives. Since she enjoys the benefits of the agreement when off duty and at the risk of others, she'd certainly be acting wrongly by blowing off her own duties when it is up to her to sound the horn. One might want to say now that, after more reflection, none of the villagers actually incur a duty when they enter into the agreement, because it is too demanding an agreement. This seems plausible when it comes to, for example, a frivolous and swaggering agreement to play Russian roulette. For one thing, nobody has a sufficiently good reason to enter into such an agreement. In the villagers' case, however, they are taking on the risk of large costs in order to avoid even larger costs. If no one entered into an agreement to keep watch, then the whole village would be defenseless against attackers. A few might finally be tempted to say that the guard's blowing of the horn would be supererogatory simply because her nonmoral, prudential reasons for not blowing it outweigh her moral reasons for blowing it. While this does not seem true, even if it were, it is the sort of move that is available only to reasons-based demandingness objections. Cost-based demandingness objections are supposed to point to flaws in moral theories in accordance with their production of overly costly requirements. The notion that these ostensive features of moral theories are

flaws, however, seems to lose its force if moral reasons are not supposed to be overriding in such cases.

This should lead us to conclude that even from a commonsensical perspective, there are some cases in which requirements hold despite extreme costs. Does this spell doom for the cost-based demandingness objection? It probably does not. It would seem plausible enough for the commonsense theorist to respond that theories and principles cannot be characterized as overly demanding in some particular instance but only in light of their demands to agents across the whole spectrum of the situations that they apply to. We can tell the objecting guard that, although she faces large costs, the situation that she's in so seldom arises that the moral principle in question is still *generally undemanding*. This of course will not make her feel any better, but it may take away her grounds to complain.[10] Let us therefore reformulate the cost-based demandingness objection as the objection for which:

1. The purported considerations in favor of moral theory *X* are not outweighed by any considerations against *X* but nonetheless are insufficient to compel us to accept *X* because *X* would be generally too costly for agents to obey.[11]

This reformulation also seems to account for the well-known fact that the burden some moral theory places on me will vary with the situation I am in. Someone isolated on the moon will face little to no moral demands because the moral demands that one faces depend on features of one's circumstances.[12] We might call this the "contingency" of morality's demandingness.

Just as the demandingness of some moral theory or principle will vary according to who in the world you happen to be, so will it vary according to which world you happen to be in. Consider, for example, Sidgwick's suggestion that we need not worry about the demandingness of utilitarianism since the extent of what we can do to help others is fairly minimal.[13] Liam Murphy has objected to this suggestion on the ground that, even assuming this was true during Sidgwick's time, it fails to carry into the twentieth century.[14] But more importantly, its failure to carry over shows us that Sidgwick's reply "is in any case an entirely contingent response to the claim of extreme demands, since it

10 Compare Ashford, "The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism," 295.

11 I do not mean "compel" in a psychological sense. I roughly just mean "would compel a sufficiently rational and moral agent."

12 See Carbonell, "Differential Demands," 427–38; and Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 98.

13 Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 428.

14 Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, 13.

obviously cannot be ruled out that changing circumstances will make it possible for individuals to do great good for others at great (though lesser) cost to themselves."[15] Those who endorse something like the cost-based demandingness objection could draw from Murphy's point against Sidgwick an even stronger version of the cost-based demandingness objection. The stronger version provides a modal view of demandingness:

2. The purported considerations in favor of moral theory *X* are not outweighed by any considerations against *X* but nonetheless are insufficient to compel us to accept *X* because *X could be* generally too costly for agents to obey.

Let us suppose that Sidgwick was right and there really was not much that people could do to help many others in the nineteenth century, and as a result, utilitarianism did not make extreme demands on people. We would not want to say that during Sidgwick's time, utilitarianism was correct, but it no longer is because the demandingness of the theory has changed.[16] Because moral theories are supposed to be the sorts of things that can apply universally, it seems strange to accept the idea that a moral theory was true up until a certain point in history. At most, all we should say is that a moral theory was truth-tracking up until a certain point in history. This consideration makes the stronger version of the cost-based demandingness objection seem like the more plausible choice: over time, we would have discovered that there had *always* been something wrong with consequentialism.[17]

2. A Modal View of Demandingness

Let us return to the village. In another possible world, attacks on the village are very frequent, occurring once every few nights. Our guard again finds herself unlucky: attackers are coming. All the same considerations apply. She entered

15 Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, 13.

16 It may be tempting to say that utilitarianism was always true but is not obligation generating any longer due to its increased demandingness. But if a theory's requirements can be successfully objected to on grounds of demandingness per se, it seems to fail. After all, a theory does not generate obligations; facts do that. Theories state obligations, and if a theory falsely states that I am obliged to ϕ, that theory is presumably flawed.

17 One might object that version 1 should be sufficient for objecting to consequentialism, even (theoretically) in Sidgwick's time, if we were to include past and future agents in our consideration. But even if the relevant features of the world never changed from Sidgwick's time on, Murphy's point should still hold because those features could have changed. Version 2 is clearly preferable, then, because it can account both for different possible worlds and for different times.

the agreement knowing this risk, specifically so she could benefit from others incurring the risk for all the nights that she is off duty. The agreement keeps her safer than she would otherwise be. (Imagine that there is another village nearby where nonagreeing villagers can go to live—one that is, obviously, less safe to live in.) She still seems to have a duty to blow the horn if she sees attackers, even if she will die. The rest of the village depends on her. The villagers, if any survived the attack, would justifiably consider themselves as having been wronged by her if she failed to blow the horn.

So now we seem to have a commonsensical moral principle that turns out to be extremely demanding in a general sense. Version 2 of the cost-based demandingness objection failed to protect it. Does this now spell doom for the cost-based demandingness objection? Not yet, since a similar, generalizing move can be made again. Recall that the main target of those making cost-based demandingness objections tends to be consequentialism. They may here say something like, "Although commonsense principles can be extremely and generally demanding in some possible worlds, consequentialism is still worse!" This response might work. Consequentialism might (a) make extreme general demands in many more possible worlds than commonsense principles and (b) make *more extreme* demands than commonsense morality in even (most of) the possible worlds where commonsense principles do make extreme general demands. Response b does not strike me as particularly interesting, since it seems only to tell us that it is possible to criticize the extreme demands of consequentialism without necessarily implicating commonsense morality. But as it stands, b says nothing on whether such a move would be warranted. After all, my argument is not that consequentialism is no more demanding than commonsense morality. Whether or not this is the case, the commonsense moral theorist appeals to the cost-based demandingness objection at risk of falling on her own sword. For if consequentialism *is* too demanding, this means that consequentialism's demandingness has crossed a threshold of acceptable costs. But if commonsense morality can also make extreme general demands, then the commonsense theorist will be hard pressed to show why commonsense morality does not also cross the line of being overly demanding. She seems to require a well-motivated theory of where the threshold is. If extreme demands can be commonsensical in some circumstances, then it seems more plausible that demandingness acceptability thresholds respond to reasons for incurring certain costs, not just to costs alone. This seems, again, to support the reasons-based view over the cost-based view of demandingness.

A more promising line of response comes from response a. Looking at how demanding commonsense morality and consequentialism would become in other possible worlds seems to tell us something important about the

demandingness of such theories. Perhaps the problem with consequentialism is that it is the sort of theory that can generate extremely demanding requirements at the drop of a hat, while commonsense morality holds out for rare and unusual conditions. If we want to assess demandingness in a modal way, then we should probably look for more than just whether a particular moral theory can become extremely and generally demanding in certain possible worlds. Rather, we should consider how many worlds have provoked such extreme demandingness. That is, our comparisons of different moral theories' demandingness should zoom out to regard their performance over the range of relevant possible worlds. We might think that the problem with Sidgwick's argument is not that consequentialism's demands have the capacity to be extreme. Rather, the problem is that consequentialism's demandingness is quite likely to become extreme. That is, the very fact that some moral theory (in our case, commonsense morality) may become extremely demanding in certain possible worlds may not suffice to establish that it is too demanding a theory in general. A theory would have to be extremely demanding in *too many* possible worlds. With these considerations in mind, the defender of commonsense morality can (in my view, correctly) suggest the following as the most reasonable version of the cost-based demandingness objection:

3. The purported considerations in favor of moral theory *X* are not outweighed by any considerations against *X* but nonetheless are insufficient to compel us to accept *X* because *X* is generally too costly for agents to obey in *too many* possible worlds.

Recall that earlier, the defender of commonsense moral theory suggested that the fact that commonsense morality may ask me to give up my life is not a sufficient basis to call the theory too demanding. This is why McElwee's version of the cost-based demandingness objection did not seem sufficient. We have to explicitly consider the *general* requirements of a moral theory, not simply how it would apply in one particular circumstance. Likewise, the defender of commonsense moral theory is now saying that we also cannot judge a theory by the general requirements it produces in one particular world. If this is true, then I cannot, as in version 1, merely talk of a theory being "generally too costly for agents to obey" in some world. While being costly or demanding can be an "intermodal" or "intramodal" property, being *too demanding* can only be an intermodal property (i.e., one that can only be correctly attributed to a theory from a modal perspective). One can think of it this way: while the move from McElwee's version of the cost-based demandingness objection to version 1 involved the idea that we should not apply the charge of over-demandingness from the perspective of a theory's requirements in some particular

circumstance but only in general, the move from version 2 to version 3 involves the idea that we should not apply the charge of over-demandingness because of the theory's requirements in some particular *world* but because of its modally general applications. Just as commonsense morality cannot be too demanding just by virtue of having extremely costly requirements for some agent *A* in some circumstance *C*, it also cannot be too demanding just by virtue of having extremely costly general requirements in some possible world *W*.

3. A Problem for the Commonsense Theorist's Demandingness Objections?

There are two further responses available to counter the commonsense theorist. The first response is that perhaps this is one of the rare worlds where consequentialism turns out to be demanding. This sort of point has been made by Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer:

> In Victorian times it would have taken weeks for news of a distant famine to reach London, and months for any substantial amounts of grain to be gathered and transported to those in need. Now we can receive news instantly, and transport food and medical supplies within days. . . . Also highly significant, however, is the fact that the gap between rich and poor—and thus the power of the rich to help the poor—has greatly increased since the mid-nineteenth century.[18]

The consequentialist might hope to point towards circumstances in our world that have rendered consequentialism particularly demanding at the present moment and to argue that these sorts of circumstances are unusual. Perhaps a sizable portion of other possible worlds features conditions under which altruistic sacrifice is less costly or frequently needed. But if one must always maximize the good, and only a small range of actions will satisfy this requirement, it seems likely that what we will have to do almost all of the time will not be what we want to do. There will of course be occasional ties and situations where deliberation between options is more costly than just picking one's preferred option, but it seems plausible enough that such situations will be the exception rather than the rule.[19]

18 De Lazari-Radek and Singer, "How Much More Demanding Is Utilitarianism Than Common Sense Morality?" 433.

19 It might be argued here that although maximizing act consequentialism will always prescribe only a small range of actions as the morally required options, the wrongness of not following these requirements will vary depending on the world. In possible worlds where world poverty has ended, maximizing consequentialism may then require people

Even if this is so, however, the commonsense theorist runs into another problem. As discussed earlier, if consequentialism turns out to be extremely demanding in more possible worlds than commonsense morality does, this does little to show that commonsense morality will not nonetheless turn out to be too demanding in a modal assessment. We still need to see whether commonsense morality crosses some threshold of acceptable demandingness. This is a plausible objection, and it points to an even larger problem: there seems to be no way to evaluate in how many possible worlds a moral theory would be extremely demanding. After all, how many possible worlds are there? There are seemingly infinite possible worlds. As a result, how are we to assess the general modal demandingness of commonsense morality?[20] Even if we can confidently assert that maximizing act consequentialism is more demanding, demandingness objections still risk backfiring against the commonsense moral theorist if she cannot account for how demanding her theory is. It does not seem like the mere fact that we do not know how demanding commonsense morality really is excuses us from these worries. After all, we either are or are not required to follow commonsense moral requirements, and these requirements supposedly depend on the demandingness of commonsense moral theory. So the fact of how demanding commonsense morality is will be very important. It may be true that as a polemic move, accusations of demandingness made towards maximizing consequentialism are more easily accomplished than accusations against commonsense morality. Nevertheless, it seems plausible enough that commonsense morality could be extremely demanding and therefore, according to the cost-based demandingness objection, false. Therefore, the commonsense theorist makes her objection, at the very least, at the risk of undermining her own claim to knowledge regarding the truth of commonsensical moral principles.[21]

to donate their time and money to a less urgent cause. And ignoring this requirement will be, as one reviewer has suggested, less wrong than ignoring the requirement to help end world poverty. However, the demandingness of a moral theory has traditionally been thought of as corresponding to that theory's requirements, which will still certainly be considered impermissible to violate. And even in a world without poverty, the requirements themselves of maximizing act consequentialism do not seem to become any less time and energy consuming.

20 This is not, by the way, to say that the commonsense theorist cannot appeal to intuitions about how demanding a moral theory or principle is in a given case, world, or sufficiently small set of worlds. My point is just that none of us has sufficient information to have reliable intuitions (if any) regarding how demanding a moral theory is from the perspective of all possible worlds.

21 This of course also applies to any other moral theorist, whether a virtue ethicist, Kantian, or a satisficing consequentialist, who accepts the cost-based demandingness objection but argues that her theory's requirements are undemanding enough to avoid the objection.

Before moving on to objections, I should acknowledge that the difficulty involved in providing a modal assessment of demandingness does provide a slight reason against using such an assessment. However, this reason could be decisive only if we were comparing it to another (at least roughly) equally good method of assessment. But as I have been arguing, we have independent reasons to think that the modal method of assessment makes the most sense—reasons that the difficulty involved in using it cannot override. By analogy, any reliable way of determining the number of other planets in the universe with intelligent life is probably impossible to carry out, but this would not mean that some other, easier method (like guessing) would be better.

4. Objections

While these arguments are far from conclusive, I would like to consider a few possible objections. First, I will consider whether my argument properly understands demandingness objections. Next, I will consider the objection that we should not take all possible worlds into account but rather only close possible worlds. Finally, I will consider an objection that commonsense morality's requirements have demandingness-related release conditions, and therefore the theory cannot become overly demanding.

Objection 1: This Argument Relies on a Distortion of Demandingness Objections

Since demandingness objections are often not very specific, one might worry about whether I have correctly understood what demandingness objections are doing in the first place. Maybe what I have been calling the "reasons-based" demandingness objection just is the demandingness objection properly understood. But Brian McElwee is not the only one to distinguish between importance and ranking-based demandingness objections on the one hand and cost-based demandingness objections on the other.[22] As mentioned in the introduction, Sarah Stroud has described and argued against the viability of arguments that attempt to "set a definite limit to morality's demands, by establishing a 'hands-off' or 'no-fly' zone which moral requirements could not penetrate."[23] Brad Hooker has also distinguished between (a) objections that some theory "*unreasonably* requires you to sacrifice your good" and (b) objections that "a plausible principle of beneficence toward strangers cannot require too big a reduction in the agent's good."[24] Hooker, moreover, has noted that "the more familiar form of

22 McElwee, "Demandingness Objections in Ethics," 88–92.

23 Stroud, "They Can't Take That Away from Me," 204.

24 Hooker, "The Demandingness Objection," 158.

the demandingness objection definitely is [b]," i.e., demandingness objections based upon the extremity of some moral theory's costs per se.[25]

Hooker's observation continues to be well supported by the literature. Matthew Braddock has characterized the demandingness objection as the view that "If a moral view demands too much of us, then it is mistaken."[26] David Sobel also seemed to have in mind the view that extreme demands per se undermine a theory's plausibility when he wrote about claims that consequentialism "asks too much of us to be a plausible ethical theory."[27] The predominance of the cost-based view might come as a surprise to some. After all, as proponents of the reasons-based view may ask, how could a moral theory be too demanding if its demands were justified? The unpopularity of the reasons-based view might seem less surprising, however, when we keep in mind that this is also the view of the maximizing act utilitarian and Shelly Kagan's "extremist," who promotes maximizing the good within deontological constraints.[28] The reasons-based view of demandingness, which does not in principle take any *a priori* position regarding what amount of costs per se would be excessive, consequently shares common ground with those who wish to disregard demandingness objections altogether.

Objection 2: We Should Care Only about Close Possible Worlds

Maybe I am reaching my conclusion only because I am not restricting the scope of evaluation of demandingness to *close* possible worlds. After all, there are (roughly) two modal scopes we can choose from in evaluating a theory or principle's demandingness. One option is to take *all* possible worlds into consideration. The other option is to take a more limited and proximate collection of possible worlds into consideration.[29] Restricting ourselves to close possible worlds might seem appealing to those motivated to ward off the relevance to demandingness of strange, science-fictional cases. But while there could be epistemic reasons to avoid relying on moral intuitions taken from such cases, our task here is simply to evaluate levels of demandingness of moral theories in other possible worlds with our intuitions about what counts as demanding already in place. Thus, such a motivation seems question begging insofar as it already presumes the irrelevance of such thought experiments.

25 Hooker, "The Demandingness Objection," 157.

26 Braddock, "Defusing the Demandingness Objection," 169.

27 Sobel, "The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection," 1.

28 Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, 9–10.

29 The boundaries of such a collection can be vague, as we might, for example, give a diminishing amount of weight to facts concerning possible worlds that are farther and farther away.

Considering all possible worlds, as we have been doing, seems appealing insofar as the presumed necessity of moral truths implies that we ought to evaluate their features in the broadest modal sense. This modally broad view seems to help us account for the fact that moral theories do not suddenly become true or false. If a moral theory is true, its truth seems "safe" in certain important ways from changes in circumstances and contingencies about what the world happens to be like.[30] Nonetheless, truths about certain features of moral theories are not necessary truths. One of these features is demandingness. Even maximizing act utilitarianism, for example, is undemanding in worlds where agents have no capacity to help each other or no capacity for happiness or suffering. This is of course why we want to perform a cross-modal analysis in the first place: demandingness varies.

I do not think these considerations actually give us any reason to worry. Although demandingness varies, the principles governing the relationship between demandingness and obligation—if there are such principles—do not. The principles governing the relationship between demandingness and obligation are either going to be moral principles themselves, or they are going to be broader normative principles (such as "all things considered" norms). The purported considerations in favor of a moral theory, in a demandingness objection, either are morally insufficient to compel us to ϕ or are insufficient, all things considered, to compel us to ϕ. If we think that moral norms are always overriding, we must also think that moral considerations to ϕ can fail to compel us only if we are *morally* excused from performing them.[31] Alternatively, if we think that moral norms are not always overriding, we might think that some moral considerations are not sufficient to compel us due to nonmoral reasons.[32] In the first case, the facts that get us off the hook from overly demanding moral theories are themselves moral facts. Since we are assuming that moral facts are necessary, then it would seem natural to consider all possible worlds in evaluating demandingness. Moreover, the principles that govern the relationship between norms in an all-things-considered framework are presumably also necessary. For example, if some reason *R* compels me, all things considered, to ϕ in

30 Even principles that need to take into account what kind of creatures we are nonetheless are themselves (presumably) subsumed under more general principles concerning, for example, the moral appropriateness of taking into account the characteristics of creatures to whom a moral theory applies.

31 Recall that I do not mean "compel" here in a psychological sense. I again just mean "would compel a sufficiently rational and moral agent."

32 Compare Dorsey, "The Supererogatory, and How to Accommodate It," 355–82; Uzunova and Ferguson, "A Dilemma for Permissibility-Based Solutions to the Paradox of Supererogation," 723–31.

world *W*, then, *ceteris paribus*, *R* will also compel me to ϕ in world W^*. This is just to say that the norms of practical rationality, whether or not moral norms are overriding, seem to be the sorts of things that, if true, are necessarily true. This would imply that no matter what view of moral overridingness you take, all possible worlds—not just close ones—will be relevant to our evaluation of a theory's demandingness.

It is also worth noting, as one reviewer has pointed out, that if we may constrain our assessment of demandingness only to close possible worlds, there seems to be no reason why people in other possible worlds could not call for the same constraint. The problem with this would be that in any possible world *W* where an agent faces demanding moral requirements from some theory, and similar demandingness obtains in possible worlds close to *W*, the agent can accuse that theory of being too demanding. This is because that agent is giving more weight to her own world and those close to it. The effect of this would be that one could avoid demanding moral requirements of various moral theories in different parts of modal space just by pointing out that the moral theories are extremely demanding in those modal regions.

It might still be suggested that our evaluation of moral theories should depend upon their application to "normal" worlds, understood according to some intuitive, noncontingent, and modally invariant criteria of normality. It seems significant, however, that in the literature, it has been quite normal for philosophers to appeal to apparently abnormal possible worlds to illustrate points or to bring up counterexamples. Consider, for example, Judith Jarvis Thomson's people seeds and violinist; Robert Nozick's utility monster; J. M. E. McTaggart's longeval oysters; John Rawls's veil of ignorance; Ninian Smart's benevolent world exploder; and Michael Tooley's chemical that would endow a kitten with human-like psychology—not to mention Chateaubriand's Mandarin paradox or Plato's Ring of Gyges.[33]

Nevertheless, I am not committed to the position that all possible worlds must be relevant (although I suspect that they are). It seems implausible to me that the commonsense theorist can escape charges of extreme demandingness by shifting the focus only to close possible worlds. To illustrate my point, let us take just one example of a requirement of commonsense morality—the requirement to care for one's children. For most inhabitants of affluent Western nations today, fulfilling this requirement, while certainly having its costs, will not pose

33 Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," 47–66; Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 140; McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, 453; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 118–92; Smart, "Negative Utilitarianism," 542–43; Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," 37–65; Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity, or Beauties of the Christian Religion*, 188; Plato, *The Republic*, 127–29.

extreme costs. But this is largely because we happen to have more than enough food, warm places to sleep, modern medicine, and strong militaries to provide protection against violence from other nations. Many people throughout history have not been so lucky. Imagine trying to fulfill this requirement during the Taiping Rebellion as a colonized subject of the British empire, as a coastal villager in the Viking Age, or during the Great Famine of 1315–17 in northern Europe. Likewise, many people today are not so lucky. Consider the extreme costs that may be involved in ensuring the safety of one's children in modern Iraq, Ukraine, or Syria, as someone who survives on under one dollar a day, or as a refugee. As such, it does not seem difficult to consider how in many close possible worlds, the requirements of commonsense morality may be extremely costly to fulfill. Those of us who feel the requirements of commonsense morality as being rather gentle may just be those lucky enough to live in very rare circumstances of affluence and safety. Perhaps the lucky ones among us have gotten so used to their circumstances that they sometimes imagine that commonsense morality is undemanding. Nonetheless, how demanding a theory is will not just depend on what that theory is like; it will also depend on what the world is like. With this in mind, we have little reason to assume that commonsense morality will be generally undemanding even in close possible worlds.

Objection 3: Commonsense Moral Obligations Have Release Conditions

Imagine that I promise to meet you for coffee but break my leg on the way to the cafe. Maybe I owe you an apology, but I am certainly released from my obligation to meet you. So, the commonsense theorist might object, it would be ridiculous to claim that my promissory obligation to meet you for coffee is too demanding because it would be too costly for me to meet you for lunch (instead of rushing to the hospital) if I broke my leg. This objection, however, relies on the assumption that all commonsense obligations have such release conditions. This is not the case. There are many commonsense obligations that remain in place even in the face of extreme costs. For example, imagine that I am a fighter in the French Resistance during World War II. I have an important mission to deliver secret information that will save many people's lives. However, I was captured by Nazis. The Nazis offer to release me if I agree to deliver false information instead—information that will kill many people. Otherwise, they will torture and kill me. Seemingly, I am obliged either to refuse this offer outright or to accept it but then betray the Nazis and deliver the real information instead. This obligation holds even if I know that I will be tortured and killed afterwards.[34]

34 Compare Stroud, "They Can't Take That Away from Me," 213–15. That my judgment here is commonsensical is perhaps supported by the fact that duress defenses are not accepted in many legal systems in cases of homicide. See, for example, "Defenses Based on Choice."

My case of the village guards serves as another example of a requirement that remains commonsensical regardless of the costs that an agent faces. After all, the guard agreed to take on the risk, usually benefits from the agreement, and would be letting many die if she did not blow the horn. If you think that it would be okay for the guard to just run and hide when attackers are coming, consider another example. Perhaps you are at the airport, and terrorists attack. You are between your helpless child and the door. You can see a terrorist start to approach. Presumably, you are obliged to collect your child before running away, even if doing so puts your life at a greater risk. Likewise, if your mother is hit by a car and paralyzed but still capable of living a good life, then you will likely be obliged to help take care of her (at least if no one else can), even if doing so is very costly to you. Finally, consider a case loosely based on the Chernobyl divers Alexei Ananenko, Valeri Bespalov, and Boris Baranov. Imagine that in order to prevent a disaster that could kill millions, a nuclear power plant worker needs to enter the plant during a meltdown to flip a certain switch. Only this worker can find the switch, which is why the responsibility falls on him. He could, if he wanted, instead choose to escape to safety before the plant explodes. It seems plausible that the worker really is required to take on this task even if it means a high chance of death. It might be argued that the very fact that we would consider this worker heroic for flipping the switch shows his action to be supererogatory rather than required. However, it is more plausible that this positive evaluation of the worker rests on a recognition of his virtues rather than on the supererogatory nature of his actions.[35] Although heroic actions are often supererogatory, these different evaluative categories are not likely to map perfectly onto each other. Thus, commonsensical obligations do not necessarily have release conditions that kick in just when costs become extreme.[36] Therefore, the "release conditions" objection also seems to fail.

In defending the cost-based demandingness objection, however, one reviewer has offered a final example that we should consider here. We might take this to be an argument about commonsensical release conditions as well. Imagine that the villagers have an agreement, upon which their lives depend, to not reveal the village's location to the enemies if they are captured on the road.

35 Compare Carbonell, "Differential Demands," 427–38.

36 One condition that might suffice for release where extreme costs would be incurred by fulfilling a comparatively trivial obligation seemingly comes from the reasons-based rather than the cost-based demandingness objection. This condition also seems to cover certain cases of over-subscription in which, in trying to discharge my duty to ϕ, I do so in such a way that makes me fail to ϕ, at least in terms of the salient description of my actions. However, there are many cases that do not fulfill such conditions. See, for example, Feinberg, "Supererogation and Rules," 276–88.

Despite the extreme stakes, a villager cannot be expected to watch his family get tortured and killed in front of him. And, the reviewer suggests, this seems true no matter what the stakes are; one cannot be expected to make this sacrifice even when protecting nuclear launch codes that would destroy civilization. Our reactions to such a case, however, may not come from intuitions about cost but instead about the limits of what we may permissibly do (or allow to be done) to others, especially close people to whom we have special relationships, in order to promote the greater good. Insofar as we would refrain from blaming the villager or soldier protecting nuclear launch codes for giving up information to save his family (assuming that doing otherwise was even psychologically possible), this plausibly is due more to our normative attitudes regarding loving relationships than to our attitudes about costs. It would after all seem very odd for the soldier or villager, if he did decide to watch his family get tortured, to bemoan the harm this has done to him rather than the harm it has done to his family. In any case, it is much easier to imagine considering someone a moral failure for giving up the nuclear launch codes and dooming civilization while only himself getting tortured. This is not, however, to imply that such a failure must warrant blame. A failure to do one's duties in such a case might be excused without having to be justified.[37] This example should remind us that even when there seem to be genuine release conditions from an obligation, it remains important to distinguish cases in which a failure to do one's duty is merely excused from cases in which there is no duty and thus no failure at all.

5. Conclusion

The cost-based demandingness objection needs to be aimed at the general applications of a moral theory in order to avoid allowing someone to raise the objection just when she happens to face heavy costs. This implies that cost-based demandingness objections are objections about the possible application of moral theories. But it seems possible for commonsense morality to likewise become extremely demanding. The commonsense moral theorist might reply that a moral theory needs to be judged not in terms of how it applies to particular worlds but rather across all possible worlds. This seems true, but since it does not seem possible to judge the demandingness of commonsense morality

37 One reviewer has pointed out that a theory might be less demanding insofar as one is less blameworthy for failure (presumably by the theory's own lights) to meet its requirements. This is an interesting suggestion, but it would risk undermining many of the demandingness objections that have been made against utilitarianism. After all, the prototypically utilitarian view on blame is a merely instrumental one. See, for example, Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*.

across all possible worlds, we are left worrying that there is no reason to think that the cost-based demandingness objection could not also successfully apply to commonsense morality. Fulfilling the requirements of commonsense morality may also be extremely demanding in many possible worlds (as could Kantianism, virtue ethics, or satisficing consequentialism). These considerations give us strong reasons to worry about the viability of the cost-based demandingness objection. Moreover, they give the consequentialist a way to reply to the commonsense theorist that does not rely on the analogousness of moral requirements, restrictions, and permissions. Finally, these considerations suggest that it is worth thinking about what other features of moral theories might, despite first appearances, require a modal analysis.

It could turn out that consequentialism generates costly requirements that agents do not have sufficient reason to follow. If a moral principle or theory did have this result in any particular instance, this would be a problem for that theory, calling for revision or further qualification. It will not suffice, however, simply to say that consequentialism crosses a threshold of acceptable costliness. For readers who are willing to forgo cost-based demandingness objections, this result can hopefully lead to a fruitful refocus towards reasons-based demandingness objections. This means shifting our concern away from costs to agents per se and towards whether the reasons that the agents have for incurring those costs are sufficient.[38]

University of Colorado at Boulder
kyle.york@colorado.edu

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