

# What is Demandingness?

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## 1 Introduction

Moral theories are often rejected on the basis of being too demanding. But what is meant by demandingness is generally left unarticulated. It is assumed that demandingness is best understood in terms of *cost* to the agent's well-being. Philosophical discussions tend to overlook the relevance of a factor which is putatively distinct from cost - namely, the *difficulty* of an agent's complying with a proposed moral prescription. In this paper, I explore the relations between these two elements of demandingness - cost and difficulty. Although cost and difficulty are in practice frequently deeply intertwined, I conclude nonetheless that neither is reducible to the other, and that both appear independently relevant in assessing the plausibility of moral theories. Thinking of moral obligation in terms of appropriate sentimental reactions like blame and guilt helps us to see why: just as it may be unreasonable to feel blame towards an agent for failing to bear significant costs for the sake of some moral end, so it may be unreasonable to feel blame towards an agent for failing to do something very difficult for the sake of moral ends. I conclude by noting that, on the account offered here, how demanding a moral prescription is will vary according to an agent's tastes and temperament, since different agents will find compliance more or less costly and more or less difficult.

## 2 Demandingness Objections

Moral philosophy has the potential to uplift us, to inspire us to live better by portraying ideals of virtue or excellence. But it also has the potential to haunt us, by leading us to moral conclusions we would rather not accept. For example, we may be led from premises that strike us as convincing, by a chain of reasoning which appears valid, to the conclusion that we are morally required to live in a way which is much more demanding than we had previously judged to be required. Perhaps the most famous modern instance of moral philosophy's capacity to haunt us in this manner is Peter Singer's article 'Famine, Affluence and Morality'<sup>1</sup>, first published in 1972. Singer offers simple arguments which purport to take us from premises that we are strongly inclined to accept to a

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<sup>1</sup> Singer 1972.

conclusion that we find deeply disturbing - that we in the developed world are morally required to give up most of our spare wealth and spare time to helping those in need around the world.

One way Singer does this is by straightforwardly asserting a moral principle which most of us are initially inclined to accept, which we may call the Principle of Sacrifice:

'if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it'.<sup>2</sup>

He then argues that this principle implies, given prevailing empirical conditions, that we ought morally (by which he means we are under a moral *obligation*) to devote most of our spare time and resources to helping some of the many millions of very needy people around the world.

Another, very memorable argument Singer deploys is an argument by analogy. We all accept that were we to come across a child drowning in a shallow pond, whose life we could save at the small cost of muddying our clothes, we would be morally required to do so. Singer argues that the moral relationship that holds between each of us and the drowning child is no different, morally speaking, to that which holds between each of us and very many victims of poverty around the world, whose lives we can save or whose suffering we can relieve at a very small cost to ourselves. And he concludes, again, that we have a moral obligation to devote most of our spare time and resources to helping such people.

If Singer's arguments are successful, then morality is much more demanding than most of us previously thought; most of us are currently living in a way which is morally wrong, and we are morally required to change our lifestyles dramatically.<sup>3</sup>

Singer's arguments have been subjected to intense scrutiny, and have given rise to some of the sharpest moral philosophy of recent decades.<sup>4</sup> Central to this discussion has been the question of how demanding morality can be, and in particular how much we can be morally required to do for the sake of others simply on the basis that they are in need and we are in a position to help.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Singer 1972, 235.

<sup>3</sup> We should note that neither of Singer's arguments rest on distinctively consequentialist premises.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Kagan 1989; Scheffler 1994; Unger 1997; Hooker 2000; Murphy 2000; Mulgan 2001; Cullity 2006; Chappell (ed.) 2009.

Perhaps surprisingly, a two-part consensus of sorts emerges in the literature:

1. We are morally required to do significantly more than most of us currently do for the sake of the needy (though it may be extremely difficult or impossible to be very specific about just how much we are required to do).
2. We are not morally required to make *extreme* sacrifices for the sake of the needy. (We are not morally required to do the most we possibly can to help distant strangers; or to devote as much of our spare time and money to helping the less well-off as would be required to bring about the best consequences we can, as per maximising act consequentialism; or to do as much as we can subject to moral constraints on promoting the good, such as duties not to steal and special duties to care for dependents.)<sup>6</sup>

Arguments for the second prong of this consensus conclusion can be summarised under the heading of ‘demandingness objections’: a theory which says that we are morally required to devote our whole lives (or something close to that) to aiding the needy should be rejected on the basis that it is implausibly demanding.

It seems clear that there can be demandingness objections which look intuitively very convincing. Consider maximising act utilitarianism, the view that we are morally obliged to bring about the best (expected) consequences we can. Suppose we encounter someone who devotes very significant amounts of time, effort, and resources to the needy, in a context in which few others do, even though he is under no social pressure to do so, but who is bringing about less good than the most he can. Maximising act consequentialism accuses him of acting morally wrongly, in spite of his seemingly extremely admirable devotion to the less well off. Alongside this apparently *undue* moral condemnation of seemingly morally admirable behaviour, maximising act consequentialism appears to deny the possibility of permissible partiality to one’s loved ones (except that which is a necessary means to maximising the impartial good), and the possibility of supererogatory action. Together these deeply counter-intuitive

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<sup>5</sup> A closely related issue is what we owe to the world’s poor on the basis of ‘negative duty’ - i.e. on the basis of the fact that we are complicit in actively harming many of the world’s poor by playing a part in sustaining a global political and economic order which deprives them a realistic chance of meeting their basic needs. See Pogge 2002. For discussion of how the distinction between negative and positive duties is less clear-cut, and perhaps less important, than we tend to think, see Lichtenberg 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions to the first part of the consensus include egoists and libertarians. Exceptions to the second are so-called ‘extremists’, such as Shelly Kagan, Singer and Peter Unger. It is striking that in a recent collection of twelve papers, almost all the authors appear to accept this two-part conclusion: Chappell (ed.) 2009.

implications ground a convincing objection that this version of consequentialism is implausibly demanding.

Before we examine the notion of demandingness in more detail, it is important to emphasise precisely which sort of ethical or evaluative claim can be subject to demandingness objections of this kind. Very high demands trouble us specifically when it is asserted that we are *morally obliged* or *morally required* to live in a burdensome way. When we feel the force of Singer's arguments for the conclusion that we are morally required to devote almost all of our spare time and effort and resources to helping the distant poor, we are stopped short, disturbed, even shocked. This is because of what is entailed by a judgement of moral requirement or obligation. To say that we are morally required or obliged to do something is to imply that (absent excuse) we merit moral condemnation for failing to do it, that we are blameworthy for failing to do it, that we ought to feel guilty about failing to do it.<sup>7</sup> If Singer's conclusion is correct, we seem committed to concluding that each of us merits significant moral criticism and feelings of blame and guilt for leading the lifestyles that we do and further such criticism if we continue to lead the sorts of lifestyles that we hitherto intended to continue leading. Moreover, minor or moderate modifications to our present lifestyles will not be enough to avoid meriting such responses. It is because of this that one feels rattled if and when one first comes to take seriously Singer's conclusion.

Importantly, these reactions are quite specific to judgements of moral requirement or moral obligation. Other sorts of ethical or evaluative judgements which make reference to demanding actions or lifestyles lack the same piquancy. Compare the claim that the *morally best* thing one can do is to devote one's life predominantly to helping the needy. This may still be controversial, of course (especially, perhaps, when applied to those with dependents). But there is no strong inclination to reject it on the basis of its being *overly demanding*. We are not haunted by the thought that the very best thing we could be doing morally speaking is living a life of extreme self-sacrifice and devotion to others. This is because one need not make the distinctively painful judgement that one merits feelings of blame and guilt just in virtue of falling short of ethical perfection. It is quite compatible with the claim that it is morally best to lead a life of extreme self-sacrifice that one is fulfilling one's moral obligations - one is living in a way which is quite *acceptable* morally speaking - by doing much less than this. This claim couched in terms of what is morally best seems compatible with our standard, common sense moral thought about helping the needy. To devote

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<sup>7</sup> For a development of this sentimentalist understanding of moral obligation and moral wrongness, see Gibbard 1990, and Skorupski 2010, Part III. A full discussion of the merits of such an approach in comparison to rival accounts of moral obligation is beyond the scope of this paper. I make some further remarks about how excuses might fit into such a framework in the final section.

one's whole life to helping those in need seems clearly supererogatory - morally very good, but well beyond the call of duty or obligation. It would be morally better to live a life of such extreme devotion to the needy, but one is not violating any moral requirement by failing to do so; one is not morally required to be a 'moral saint' or a 'moral hero'.<sup>8</sup> So standard demandingness objections in ethics are objections to theories of moral *requirement* or moral *obligation*, which claim that we are morally required or obligated to live in a way which is very demanding.

### 3 Demandingness and the Appeal to Cost

In much of the philosophical literature, the notion of demandingness is left at an intuitive level. Since it is uncontroversial that a theory which morally requires us to give up almost all of our spare time and money to help the poor would be demanding, analysis of the concept might not seem urgent. However, in assessing whether a claimed moral requirement is *too* demanding to be a genuine moral requirement, it is important to try to pin down what the term refers to.<sup>9</sup>

When a specific characterisation of demandingness is offered, it is generally given in terms of *costs*. At least one thing that seems disturbing about the moral extremist's claim is that, if it is correct, then complying with my moral obligations is going to involve me being much *worse-off* than I had hoped. Doing what is morally required by the lights of the extremist seems to impose on me a much *lower level of well-being* than the one I am likely to enjoy if I need comply only with a much more lax requirement of beneficence. Perhaps before reading Singer's arguments, I had planned to live a nice, balanced life of working reasonably hard at my job, pursuing my hobbies and interests fully, having healthy relationships with family and friends, generally being a nice person, and giving some minimal amount to a favoured charity every so often. But if Singer is correct, it seems that such a happy, balanced lifestyle would be morally wrong. In fact, I need to devote almost all of my spare time, energies and resources to helping strangers in desperate need. If I am to live in a way that is morally permissible, I will need to forgo very many treasured pursuits - from now on, I'll be spending a lot less time with my nieces and nephews, watching films, going out for meals with my friends, learning a new language, going on nice holidays when I get time off work. Not only will I have to divert the money which I

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<sup>8</sup> See Urmson 1958 and Wolf 1982.

<sup>9</sup> An alternative conception of over-demandingness involves saying that a prescription is not too demanding to be what morality requires, but is too demanding to be what we have (decisive) reason to do, even though it is what morality requires. Such a conception, which may be endorsed within a framework which denies the 'over-ridingness' of moral obligation, is defended in Dorsey 2012.

intended to spend on my preferred pastimes and luxury items, but I'll be spending most of the time I'm not at work trying to help people I have never met, rather than doing all the things that I enjoy most. I may even have to switch careers, from a profession which I enjoy and find fulfilling, to one which is stressful and dull, but is higher paying and so will enable me to transfer more wealth to people in dire need.

Setting aside whether Singer's arguments are successful or not, and hence the question of whether this is *too much* to morally require of me, it seems clear that his moral prescription is very demanding indeed, just in the sense that it imposes these significant costs upon me. It appears that my well-being will be significantly diminished, given the many disparate and substantial goods that my life will lack if I comply with the prescription, and which I otherwise would have enjoyed.<sup>10</sup>

However, seeing demandingness solely in terms of costs to well-being faces objections. Most notably, it might be thought to leave out an apparently distinct notion which is integral to the demandingness of the extremist's moral theory: difficulty. Discussions of demandingness often mention in passing the possibility of framing demandingness objections around the idea of difficulty, before going on to focus exclusively on costs to well-being. The relative neglect of considerations of difficulty appears surprising in light of dictionary definitions of the term 'demanding', which make reference to requiring effort, skill, attention, or patience. These bear a striking resemblance to dictionary definitions of 'difficult'. By contrast, dictionary definitions of 'costly' are quite distinct, referring to damage or suffering; detriment or disadvantage; loss or sacrifice.

More significantly perhaps, awkward questions about the appeal to cost may point towards re-construing demandingness objections as fundamentally concerned with difficulty, rather than cost. If I devote myself to helping the needy to the extreme degree required by maximising act consequentialism, I surely will bear very significant costs to my well-being. However, as David Sobel has pressed, if the line of complaint against the theory is simply that *some person* - in this case, me - will have to bear great costs as a consequence of acceptance of

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<sup>10</sup> Insofar as demandingness objections focus on cost to the well-being of the agent who complies with a moral prescription, tricky questions arise about what is the appropriate comparison class for measuring the extent of the demands. It seems that we should compare the agent's well-being if he complies with his well-being if he does not comply. But there are many possible worlds in which he does not comply. Is the relevant one that in which he faces no moral constraints at all? Or the constraints issued by some other moral theory? Or should we instead measure the demandingness of a moral theory's prescriptions, not by comparison with some other set of moral prescriptions, but instead simply by what absolute level of well-being the agent will have if he complies? These questions are discussed by Murphy 2000. Important though they are, I will not pursue them here.

the theory being assessed, an obvious response can be made.<sup>11</sup> Under a theory which is *less* demanding on comfortably off agents, which allows them to expend a large amount of their time and resources on themselves, the costs borne by the poor who will go unhelped will be even greater – that is, greater than the costs to the better-off agents to which we have appealed in order to question demanding-looking theories like maximising act consequentialism. A life of extreme devotion to helping the needy may be significantly worse for me than the relatively balanced one which I currently lead, but it will still compare very favourably to the lives of those in poverty who will go unhelped if I do less. I can clearly make a bigger difference to overall well-being (or to the overall minimisation of costs) by compliance with a theory which seems extremely demanding on me than I can by merely complying with a theory of moderate demands which allows me to lead a reasonably balanced life.<sup>12</sup> In the face of this, can there really be a demandingness objection to a moral theory which is based on an appeal to cost to well-being?

Most of us will still have the feeling that Singer's prescription, or worse the maximising act consequentialism principle, *is* too demanding on people like us. It may be that we are morally required to do significantly more to help the distant poor than most of us currently do. But are we really morally required to live a life of extreme altruism? Again, someone who devotes a very substantial amount of their spare time and resources to helping the needy, yet falls short of doing the most they can to relieve overall suffering, seems not to be acting morally wrongly. She appears to be extremely morally admirable; she does not merit the distinctive sentimental sanctions - blame, guilt - associated with a judgement of moral wrongness. The thought persists that the sacrifices which are required by Singer's principle, or by maximising act consequentialism, are too great to be plausible genuine moral requirements. The costs that Singer's principle imposes on the agent seem implausibly high. But in light of the considerations just raised, it is not clear that a general appeal to cost will count in favour of a less demanding morality. The costs which are imposed on 'patients'<sup>13</sup> by a less demanding moral theory, which permits the well-balanced lifestyle we would prefer to live, are significantly greater than the costs which the more

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<sup>11</sup> Sobel 2007. For earlier discussion along related lines, see Kagan 1989, Scheffler 1994, Murphy 2000, Mulgan 2001.

<sup>12</sup> An appeal to cost need not imply commitment to minimising aggregated costs. Instead, it might involve a contractualist-style claim that a moral theory should minimise the largest cost or burden which is allowed to befall any particular individual. But again, it seems that I can prevent greater costs to very many desperately poor individuals, taken one by one, by compliance with the demanding theory, than I will prevent befalling myself by living a more balanced lifestyle.

<sup>13</sup> I am not suggesting that it is appropriate or useful to think of the global poor primarily as patients in the sense of people who have no active role to play in improving their lives; my point here is just to make a distinction between the agent, who is addressed by a moral theory or principle, and those others for whose sake the theory imposes requirements.

demanding moral theory imposes on the agent. A simple appeal to cost seems, in empirical circumstances like ours, to speak in favour of principles and theories which, like Singer's principle and act-utilitarianism, impose extreme demands on relatively affluent people in the developed world.

If we are confident that there is nonetheless a good demandingness objection to such principles and theories, *the appeal to cost embodied in the objection must treat differentially the costs which befall the agent and those which befall those who would be helped by the agent's compliance with a theory which is more demanding for the agent.* But what could be the rationale for such a differential treatment of costs?

I think any such rationale must begin from the thought that something is being *demande*d of an agent in a way that it is not being demanded of the patients. It is the agent alone who is being called to action by the theory. As such, the costs which he bears in complying with the demand are ones which he is required to impose upon himself; costs befalling *patients* as a consequence of agents complying only with a more lax theory are not self-imposed costs.

To see the relevance of this, it helps to think here in terms of appropriate reactions to agents' behaviour. Blame is generally less appropriate towards someone who fails to do something good when it involves making a significant sacrifice to her own well-being, than if she fails to do some good where it involves minimal sacrifice to her own well-being. But at least one reason this may be so is that one merits lesser blame for a failure to do something which is more difficult to do than some action that was very easy to perform.<sup>14</sup> Plausibly then, part of the explanation why costs which one is required to impose upon oneself figure so prominently in determining appropriate demands is because of the *difficulty* (in this case, what we might call *motivational difficulty*) of imposing costs upon oneself.

If we endorse this line of thinking, then it suggests that when we look in more detail at costs to an agent's well-being as a rationale for standard demandingness objections, at least one thing that we may be appealing to fundamentally is the difficulty of complying. Some account of our moral obligations can be rejected just on the basis that complying with the supposed obligations is too difficult.

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth emphasising here that it may be not only sacrifice to one's own well-being that attenuates blame, or makes blame wholly inappropriate; requiring that one sacrifice the well-being of one's loved ones seems relevant too.



## 4 Difficulty

### 4.1 *Difficulty and Cost*

In one of the few discussions of costliness and difficulty in the literature, G. A. Cohen (discussing a passage from Thomas Nagel) states with little argument that difficulty, when fully separated from issues of cost, can do nothing to count against a moral requirement:

'Its difficulty [that of voluntary giving], as such, is no reason for not performing an action that (although difficult) is possible, and the voluntary giving that Nagel has in mind is undeniably possible. Nagel is not invoking the prospect of a pathological paralysis of the will. It's of course unreasonable to ask someone to do something impossible, but it's not unreasonable to ask someone to do something difficult, provided that it does not carry too high a cost.'<sup>15</sup>

Doing something difficult very frequently involves bearing some cost, in several ways. Firstly, difficult activities may involve painful or uncomfortable effort. Consider trying to master a fiendishly difficult violin piece, which requires repeatedly stretching the fingers of one's left hand and pressing on the fret, in a way that leaves one's hand aching after each attempt. Or trying to run a fast time in a marathon – training for this will require one to push oneself beyond one's comfort zone time and time again, repeatedly experiencing painful and otherwise unpleasant physical sensations. Relatedly, difficult activities frequently involve frustration and stress. When we try very hard to get something right, but keep failing, we can be overwhelmed by frustration. And attempting to do something difficult very often involves uncertainty about whether we are going to be successful, an uncertainty which may itself be hugely stressful, when one sets great store by success, or fears the consequences of failure. Another category of costs associated with difficulty is opportunity costs. Things which are difficult can involve a large number of attempts in order to achieve success, and often require many hours, days, months, years spent in training. The time expended in doing something difficult is time that could have been spent doing other, more pleasant activities. Persevering with time-consuming difficult tasks is frequently boring.

Although difficult activities are often costly in ways such as these, they are not always so, and even when there are such costs, these may be clearly outweighed by compensating benefits, such as the enjoyment of being challenged and of testing one's capacities to their limits, feelings of achievement, pride in one's

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<sup>15</sup> Cohen 2000, 172.

abilities and efforts, and pleasure at the prospect of being admired by others. We can quite readily make sense of someone who says, 'That was a really demanding examination. But I enjoyed it!' Here it is clear that by 'demanding' is meant 'difficult', and that difficulty is something quite distinct from costliness.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, many of our most satisfying experiences are of doing things which are very difficult, but which we can achieve by applying skill or effort. Our preferred level of difficulty for tasks is not always as-easy-as-possible. A really easy crossword is no fun at all. A crossword that is too hard might not be much fun either - even if it is *possible* for me to do it, if it takes me an average of ten hours of thinking to work out each clue, I typically won't enjoy the challenge.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, our preferred level of costliness is almost always as-uncostly-as-possible.<sup>18</sup>

Though difficulty seems clearly separable from costliness, it is not obvious that things which are difficult but not costly have much relevance in debates about the appropriate demandingness of moral obligations. Though it may count against a putative moral obligation that it will impose significant costs to the agent's well-being, why should it count against a proposed moral obligation that it requires us to do something difficult which will make us no worse off, and may even make us better off? *Mere* difficulty may, as Cohen suggests, be deemed irrelevant.

#### 4.2 *The Relevance of Difficulty*

Viewing appeal to difficulty, when fully disentangled from costliness, as irrelevant in assessing appropriate moral demands seems to me nonetheless to be a mistake. We already saw in the previous section that the appeal to cost which

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<sup>16</sup> Cohen puts the distinction thus: 'The cost of an action for me is what I lose (but would have preferred to keep) as a result of performing it, whereas its difficulty for me is a function of how my capacities measure up to the challenge it poses. So, for example, it is difficult, but not necessarily (commensurately) costly, for me to put the thread into the needle's tiny hole, or to return a well-placed tennis serve. But I do not necessarily suffer pain, or lose anything, if I manage to pull off these feats: I might find these difficult activities enjoyable.' Cohen 2000, 171.

<sup>17</sup> Compare Cohen: 'The evident truth that a desirable job for a given person must be neither too difficult nor too easy for him proves that difficulty and cost (which is by definition (in itself) undesirable) are entirely distinct, conceptually. If difficulty were, as such, a form of cost, then, other things equal, one would always want the job that is least difficult. But of two jobs whose other costs are indeed equal, one wants one of optimal difficulty, that is, of a difficulty neither too great nor too small, rather than one of the least difficulty.' Cohen 2000, 218, endnote 39 to p. 171.

<sup>18</sup> We do, of course, frequently prefer something which involves greater costs when it is a necessary means to securing sufficiently large benefits. More interesting are putative exceptions which involve choosing costs to oneself simply on the perceived basis that one deserves to suffer in some way, and on some other basis which involves suffering as somehow 'fitting'.

figures in standard demandingness may be best understood as making reference to considerations of difficulty. One response might be: so much the worse for standard demandingness objections. However, I think appeal to difficulty can be made independently plausible, by reflecting again on the role of appropriate sentimental reactions in picking out appropriate moral demands.

Earlier, we noted that theories of *moral obligation* in particular face demandingness objections because it seems unreasonable to bring to bear the sanctions of the moral sentiments (blame, guilt) on someone who has shown very substantial (though suboptimal) devotion to helping the less well off. The crucial point for our purposes is that such charges of unreasonable demandingness seem to be left intact in cases where it is in the agent's best interests to do as the theory requires, but he fails to do so because it is extremely difficult.

Suppose that my best bet in promoting the good impartially in some situation is to engage in a really difficult (though not impossible) challenge - a super-marathon, perhaps. Even if it were true that I would be better off if I succeeded in the challenge, in virtue of the self-respect and esteem from my peers which would result, it nonetheless seems unreasonably demanding to say that I am morally required to complete the challenge - it is just too difficult to be morally required. More generally, consider the class of actions which are extremely difficult to do (or to bring oneself to do), even though one confidently judges that they are in one's own best interest: examples include being open about an embarrassing medical condition; bringing a relationship to an end; or, to take an extreme case, cutting off one's own arm without anaesthetic when doing so is the only way to save one's life.<sup>19</sup> In some cases in this class of actions, it seems that there could be considerations at stake which would be sufficient to generate a moral obligation, *were it not for the difficulty of performing the act in question*. Suppose the only way that I can save a *friend's* life is to cut off *his* arm without anaesthetic. This may be a case where overall costs/benefits to me speak in favour of performing an action which there is strong moral reason to perform, but which is not morally obligatory, simply because of the extreme difficulty of doing so. The mere fact that the action would be extremely difficult to perform makes it *too demanding* to be morally obligatory.

Consider now the case of actions aimed at helping those in poverty. It is often pointed out that a life of altruism brings its own distinctive satisfactions: feelings

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<sup>19</sup> Ralston 2005. Interestingly, the examples which spring most readily to mind are ones in which though the action in question is not overall costly to the agent, it does involve the imposition of significant costs at some particular time, generally an earlier time than that at which one will secure the compensating benefits or be spared some larger cost. This may leave some leeway for arguing that, after all, there is indeed some conceptual link between cost and difficulty, and that demandingness may be understood ultimately in terms of cost alone.

of comradeship, pride in one's efforts; giving one's life a sense of meaning.<sup>20</sup> Of course, it may be that a life of *extreme* altruism of the kind recommended by the utilitarian, or by Singer, will leave one with an overall lower level of well-being than one might have by living a more balanced life; nonetheless, a life with significantly more altruism than most of us in developed countries currently live would plausibly be better for us as individuals than our present minimally altruistic lifestyles, just because of these sorts of considerations. Would such putative facts about the various costs and benefits (to ourselves and others) of stepping up our altruism settle questions of how much can be demanded of us? It seems to me that they do not. In principle, we must also make reference to considerations of difficulty. Even if a life of very significant altruism is deeply fulfilling, and so does not involve a great overall sacrifice to one's well-being, it may yet be extremely difficult to be motivated to pursue it. Giving up those goods with which one is familiar for the sake of goods that are alien, unfamiliar and of which one has a limited grasp, may be extremely difficult, and someone who fails to do it may not merit criticism or blame, just because of that difficulty. Compare the way one might feel daunted by the prospect of moving abroad, away from all of one's friends, even though one might be confident that one will make new friends, and live a happy life if one only takes the plunge. Or compare doing something scary, like bungee-jumping - one might be confident that one will enjoy it. In such cases, it seems that how we should feel about an agent who fails to perform the act in question must take into account considerations of difficulty, and not just considerations of overall cost and benefit to the agent. We should be less inclined to feel blame towards someone who fails to do something morally good, even when it does not involve any significant overall sacrifice to the agent's well-being, if the action is extremely difficult, as compared to someone who fails to perform such an action when it's extremely easy to perform. If we should understand moral obligation in terms of blameworthiness, as I have urged, then this suggests that in principle considerations of difficulty, and not just of cost, must be factored into a convincing account of our moral obligations.

I emphasised earlier that standard demandingness objections are concerned specifically with *moral obligations* construed as closely linked to what merits blame, guilt, or serious criticism. Contrast 'requirements' on doing what is best, or reaching some ideal. It is no objection to an account of what it is to be the best basketball player in the country that it requires one to do certain things which are difficult. But it *can* be an objection to a theory of moral obligation that it requires one to do something extremely difficult in order to fulfil one's moral obligations - just because the feelings of blame mandated by a judgement that a moral obligation has been violated may be out of place when it is extremely

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<sup>20</sup> See Lichtenberg 2013, Chapter 6.

difficult to perform the action in question. The thought that our best judgements of blameworthiness are sensitive to considerations of difficulty may be motivated in a similar way to our endorsement of an 'ought implies can' principle. A major motivation for asserting such a principle is that it is unreasonable to feel blame towards someone just for failing to do something which it was not possible for her to do. But this thought can usefully be regarded simply as the limiting case of a more general principle that difficulty impacts on when it is reasonable to feel blame. Cases of actions which are *impossible* to perform stand at the end of a spectrum, running through actions which are almost impossible (extremely difficult) to perform, through moderately difficult actions, to ones which are easy to perform, and ones which are difficult to avoid doing, or even impossible to avoid doing. When it comes to failures to perform actions which are in some way morally good, the following principle is attractive: All else being equal, one merits lesser blame, guilt or serious criticism for a failure to do something good which is more difficult to do, than for a failure to do something good which is easier to do.

If this is right, and if we accept a tight connection between moral obligation and blameworthiness, then Cohen's two-part claim that 'It's of course unreasonable to ask someone to do something impossible, but it's not unreasonable to ask someone to do something difficult, provided that it does not carry too high a cost'<sup>21</sup> looks under-motivated. Why should we regard this as an all-or-nothing matter? Why should we think that as soon as something becomes absolutely impossible, blame becomes inappropriate, but that when something falls just short of this - when it is almost impossible, or extremely difficult - this feature has no tendency to mitigate blame, to 'get us off the hook' of moral obligation?<sup>22</sup>

Cohen rejects the idea that difficulty (once separated from cost) can play any role in 'a *justification* for not giving when the state does not force me to'.<sup>23</sup> The term 'justification' in this context is ambiguous. It is crucial to distinguish two senses of justification for not giving: (1) a consideration which speaks in favour of not giving; (2) a consideration which speaks against regarding giving as morally required. Considerations of difficulty provide justification in the second sense even though they are not, when considerations of cost are separated out, a justification in the first sense. The fact that some action is difficult to perform is

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen 2000, 172.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, we might think that if some good action is impossible to avoid doing, one does not get credit for doing it. Though one may get credit for being such that one would have done it, even in circumstances where one could have avoided doing it. Cohen himself clearly does not accept such a tight link between blameworthiness and moral obligation, so it may be that he would accept the general point about the difficulty mitigating blame, but resist the idea that this has implications for what is correctly regarded as morally obligatory.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen 2000, 170, my italics.

not a good reason not to perform it, except insofar as the difficulty brings costs to well-being in its train: for example, the costs of making a painful or stressful effort, or opportunity costs of having to spend valuable time in persevering to succeed. But the fact that the action is difficult to perform does make a difference to how we ought to feel about an agent who fails to perform an action that was worth performing.

Even if it is wrong to dismiss difficulty as independently relevant to what we should treat as morally obligatory, Cohen's arguments for his main claim in this stage of his discussion seem successful. His conclusion is that the strongest rationale that a (relatively) well-off egalitarian can provide for endorsing forced redistribution by the state, while declining to voluntarily impose corresponding costs upon himself, makes reference to the relative disadvantage, compared to one's peers, that one would subject oneself to by voluntarily and unilaterally giving up that amount which (by the egalitarian's own lights) the state would be justified in taking. But it seems to me that there are two reasons, not just one, for why these considerations of relative disadvantage affect what is morally obligatory: (i) there are distinctive extra *costs* to giving up a degree of wealth when one's peers are not doing the same, and (ii) there is an extra (motivational) *difficulty* in giving up a degree of wealth when one's peers are not doing the same. If that is correct, then some of Cohen's final remarks can prompt us to recognise another way in which attention to appropriate sentimental reactions points towards the relevance of difficulty to appropriate demands – consideration of how the obligatory relates to the *admirable*. Cohen concludes that '[t]he beauty of a state-imposed duty, or of a *general* ethos of giving, is that, when they obtain, each well-paid person can then give without departing from the norm, and therefore without having to accomplish an especially saintly response to peer-group constraints.'<sup>24</sup> In a recent paper, Gwen Bradford argues that the intrinsic value of achievement lies in success at doing something difficult, which in turn is to be understood in terms of 'excellent exercise of the will'.<sup>25</sup> An alternative view might make room for excellent exercise of practical rationality as part of what is involved in succeeding at something difficult.<sup>26</sup> It is very plausible to think in general that the fact that some behaviour would be 'especially saintly', that it would exhibit excellence, that it would be positively admirable, that it would be beyond the run-of-the-mill is (defeasible) reason to take it not to be obligatory, but to be supererogatory. Mere failure to do something admirable is not generally blameworthy; it does not count as a failure to do something morally required. There may indeed be cases of authentic obligations which are very difficult to comply with, and where one would merit admiration for complying. But this does not undermine the claim that considerations of

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<sup>24</sup> Cohen 2000, 175.

<sup>25</sup> Bradford 2013, 222.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Hurka 1993.

difficulty tend towards making what would otherwise be obligatory non-obligatory.

### 4.3 Justification and Excuse

One possible response to the line of thought developed here, tying our judgements of moral obligation closely to judgements of appropriate blame-responses, is to appeal to a distinction between justification and excuse. It may be proposed that the fact that some morally good action is difficult to perform can sometimes be an excuse for not doing it, but it does not affect its status as being justified.

Is there some principled way of distinguishing between cases where considerations which make blame inappropriate undercut a moral obligation, and cases where considerations which make blame inappropriate mean simply that one has an excuse for failing to do what was morally obligatory?

It seems to me that the best account of this distinction will make reference to normal circumstances. Roughly: some action is morally wrong just if someone would merit feelings of blame for doing it in normal circumstances. Features of one's situation which are abnormal may make a case one of blameless wrongdoing; in such cases, one has an excuse in virtue of specific features of one's situation – for example, one snapped at a friend because one had been under severe stress; one failed to keep a promise to meet up because one had been suffering from depression; one gave a legitimate complaint short shrift because one had a debilitating headache. In each of these cases, the agent does something other than what there was most reason to do; in each case, one would merit blame under normal circumstances for acting as the agent does; in each case, the agent in question does not merit blame because of the idiosyncratic situation she is in.

The important point for our purposes is that room is left for defending the view that one need not do what there is strongest (or equal strongest) reason to do in order to have fulfilled one's moral obligations. The limits of moral obligation may be set by what it would be blameworthy for someone in normal circumstances to fail to do. Such a picture fits well with our recognition of the phenomenon of supererogation. In the case of obligations of beneficence, it may be that there is *strongest reason* to live an extremely self-sacrificial life and thereby do very large amounts of good for others, but that if one does a bit less, but still a very substantial amount, one has fulfilled one's moral obligations; one need not reach the very top of the scale in order to have acted in a morally acceptable way,

when reaching the top of the scale would require incurring great costs to one's well-being, or would require doing something which is extremely difficult to do.

To conclude, considerations of difficulty appear independently relevant in determining the extent of appropriate moral demands. If that is correct, then should we see difficulty as a second aspect of demandingness, *alongside* costliness? Or should we regard difficulty as the *sole* relevant feature that we appeal to in rejecting a theory as too demanding? The argument of Section 2 suggested that there may be something problematic about the appeal to cost as it figures in standard demandingness objections: costs to agents need to be given a special priority, as compared to costs to patients, if demandingness objections are to have the sort of scope usually presumed. I suggested that the best way of explaining why costs to agents figure differently is that they are costs which are self-imposed. *One* reason why self-imposed costs are to be treated differently than costs imposed on (or allowed to befall) others is that it is difficult to impose (significant) costs upon oneself, but not generally difficult to impose them on others (and easier still to merely allow them to befall others).<sup>27</sup> But in the final reckoning it seems to me that this does not exhaust the relevance of the distinction between costs to agents and patients. It seems plausible to say that the simple fact that performing some act, A1, will lead to a cost to me, while some alternative act, A2, will lead to a larger cost falling instead upon someone else, can be sufficient to ground a moral permission to perform A2 instead of A1 - *even if somehow performing A1 is as easy as performing A2*. This is a difficult issue to have firm intuitions about just because, given the motivational structures humans almost universally have, imposing a cost upon oneself is almost invariably more difficult than imposing a cost on a stranger.

## 5 Conclusion

Let me end with some brief remarks about the variability in felt demands. Consider a moral prescription, which applies to two agents, Andy and Betty, which requires each to devote a significant portion of their spare time to helping in a soup kitchen for the local homeless. Andy and Betty have different tastes and temperaments. Andy finds it tiresome to spend evenings at the soup kitchen. While he recognises that he can do some genuine good for people in need by helping out, he feels extremely awkward, struggling to relate to either the homeless people he meets there or his fellow volunteers, who are too zealously

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<sup>27</sup> Importantly, of course, it may be extremely difficult to impose costs on our loved ones (or to merely allow costs to befall them). This plausibly has important consequences for the extent to which we are morally required to promote the impartial good when doing so is in competition with promoting the good of our loved ones.



religious for his tastes. On the other hand, Betty finds that she looks forward helping out at the kitchen. She meets all kinds of interesting people with very different life experiences from her own, and when those she helps express gratitude towards her, she feels proud in a way that she never feels in any other part of her life. For Andy, compliance with the prescription is felt as a significant burden and is difficult to comply with; for Betty, complying barely registers as a burden at all, and she does not find it at all difficult to comply.

Just as the felt burdensomeness and difficulty of complying with a prescription can vary from agent to agent, so it can vary within one agent's life, as temperament and outlook change. Consider a teenager, Charlie, asked by her parents to visit elderly relatives during the summer holidays. One year, she finds it incredibly dull, and resents being dragged away from the fun she could be having with friends. The following year, by contrast, to her surprise she finds spending time with her relatives really enjoyable, listening to their fascinating stories about their childhood. What Charlie once felt as a significant burden is now experienced as a pleasure. What was previously both costly and difficult now seems no trouble at all.

Just how demanding a theory is for an individual agent – both in terms of cost and difficulty – depends not just on the actions or lifestyle the theory prescribes, but also on the psychology of the agent. This fact raises a series of important questions: Are those who find it easier and less costly to act altruistically in general morally required to do more to help others than those who find it more difficult and more costly? How do the facts about how one comes to have the tastes and temperament one does factor into answering this question? Moral hazard is introduced by the contention that one can lessen the moral demands with which one is faced by indulging 'expensive tastes', putting oneself in a position where one finds it especially difficult and costly to make sacrifices of time and resources for the sake of others. Besides our duties of beneficence, do we have complementary duties of self-improvement to shape our tastes and temperament such that we find it easier and less burdensome to behave altruistically? How is the apparent relevance of differences across agents in felt burdensomeness and difficulty in compliance to be reconciled with a conception of morality which lays down the same rules for every person? These are issues I hope to address in some detail in future work.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Much of the material in this chapter was presented at a Demandingness Workshop at the University of St Andrews in June 2014; I am very grateful to the attendees for discussion of these issues. I would also like to thank Jason Gabriel, Michael Kuehler, Chris Macleod, Theron Pummer, Martin Sticker, and Marcel van Ackeren for extremely helpful feedback on a draft of the chapter.

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