

The Demands of Consequentialism

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1

Introduction

If you are reading this, then you are very privileged. In a world of starvation, poverty, misery, and war, you have time to enjoy the luxury of philosophy. Obviously enough, so do I. One of the purposes of this book is to ask whether such behaviour is justified.

There are very many very needy people in the world. About 20 million people a year starve to death. About one billion people live in severe poverty. Gross domestic product per capita is over \$20,000 in the twenty wealthiest countries, and under \$250 in the poorest fifteen. Life expectancy is over 76 in Japan, virtually all of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. It is under 50 in Afghanistan, Angola, Botswana, Chad, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Somalia. In Sierra Leone, Malawi, and Uganda it is under 40.¹

A variety of charitable agencies can alleviate these needs. No doubt governments, multinationals, and others could do far more than they do. But the question still remains: faced with such urgent needs, at least some of which I could meet at comparatively little cost to myself, how should I as an individual act?

Since the nineteenth century, one influential approach to moral questions has been Consequentialism. Consequentialists claim that the right thing to do in any situation is the act with the best consequences. (One prominent form of Consequentialism is Utilitarianism, where the value to be maximized is human happiness.) What response would Consequentialism require to the situation described in previous paragraphs? How should I spend my next dollar? Consequentialism tells me to put that dollar wherever it will do the most good. In the hands of a reputable aid agency, my dollar could save a child from a crippling illness. A few more dollars might make a substantial contribution towards a clean water supply for an entire village. Could I do anything nearly as valuable with my dollar if I kept it for myself? It is highly unlikely. Dollars do not go very far in affluent suburbs in the developed world any more.

So I should give my next dollar to charity. How should I then spend my next remaining dollar? Well, in the hands of a reputable aid agency. . . It looks

¹ These figures are drawn from *The Economist Pocket World in Figures 2000 edition*, pp. 86–7; quoted in Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, p. 147.

as if I must keep donating till I reach the point where my own basic needs, or my ability to keep earning dollars, are in jeopardy. Most of my current activities will have to go. Nor will my sacrifice be only financial. According to Consequentialism, I should also spend my time where it will do most good. I should devote all my energies to charity work, as well as all my money.

Perhaps we would admire someone who behaved in this way. But is it plausible to claim that those of us who do not are guilty of wrongdoing; or that we have a moral obligation to devote all our resources to charity? Some advocates of Consequentialism have even suggested that our failure to do so is morally no different from murder. (On the grounds that there is no morally significant difference between killing someone and allowing him to die when one could have saved him.)

Such conclusions strike many people as absurd. This leads to the common objection that Consequentialism is unreasonably demanding, as it leaves the agent too little room (time, resources, energy) for her own projects or interests. I shall call this the Demandingness Objection. This book is an examination of Consequentialist responses to this objection. I seek to construct a Consequentialist moral theory that is not unreasonably demanding.

Our discussion will often focus on the following story.

Affluent's Tale. Affluent is an affluent citizen of a developed country, who already makes significant donations to charity. She is sitting at her desk with her cheque book. In front of her are two pamphlets: one from a reputable international aid organization, the other from her local theatre company. Affluent has enough money either to buy theatre tickets or to make a donation to the charity, but not both. Because of her love of the theatre, she buys the tickets, even though she knows that the money would have done far more good if sent to the charity.

The Demandingness Objection says that Consequentialism must condemn Affluent's behaviour, and that this is unreasonable. As the foregoing discussion makes apparent, this is no abstract tale. Allowing for minor variations—perhaps aid agencies solicit your donation by television, perhaps you prefer movies to theatre—we are all Affluent throughout much of our daily life. What Consequentialism demands of Affluent it will demand of us all. The purpose of this book is to ask what Consequentialism really does demand, and whether those demands are reasonable.

1.1. The Relevance of the book

Our discussion may seem of limited interest, as only those who are predisposed towards Consequentialism will be concerned to discover its limits. However, many other moral theories must address the same questions as Consequentialism. In particular, if we have obligations to meet the needs of others, then we are owed an explanation of the structure and limits of those obligations. Even within a Non-Consequentialist theory, obligations to aid others often take a Consequentialist form. An exploration of the limits of Consequentialism is useful to anyone interested in understanding morality.

In the remainder of this section, I explore the demands of various prominent moral and political theories and their relationship to the demands of Consequentialism. Our purpose here is to explore broad moral approaches, not to engage in detailed exegetical or analytical discussion of any particular moral theory.

1.1.1. *Kantian Ethics*

The basis of Kant's ethics is the search for a rational foundation for morality.² Only if our actions are grounded solely in rationality can they be truly free, and hence worthy of moral assessment. The test of rationality is the Categorical Imperative, under which a rational agent acts only according to maxims (or principles) that can consistently be willed as universal laws. Kant tests a maxim by asking if it would be consistent for a rational agent to desire a world where everyone obeyed that maxim. For instance, Kant argued that the maxim 'Tell lies' cannot be universally adopted, as that would be self-defeating. The point is not just that universal lying would have bad consequences. Rather, Kant is claiming that it is not possible for lying to be universal. It only makes sense to tell a lie if you expect other people to believe you. If everyone always lied, no one would ever believe anyone. There would thus be no point in lying. The very concept of lying would lose its meaning of 'deceptive presentation of falsehood intended to be accepted by others as truth'. Therefore, no rational agent will ever tell a lie, whatever the consequences.³

² For Kant's most accessible account of moral philosophy, see his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. An excellent historical introduction to contemporary themes in Kantian ethics is Schneewind, 'Autonomy, Obligation, and Virtue'. See also Korsgaard, 'Kant' and O'Neill, 'Kantian Ethics'.

³ Korsgaard, 'The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil'.

Kant also offers an alternative formulation of the Categorical Imperative. He argues that rational agents will always treat human beings as ends-in-themselves, and never merely as means to their own ends. Lying constitutes a classic failure to respect another as an end, as you deprive the other person of the chance to decide for himself whether or not to be used as a means to your end.

Kant's commitment to impartiality clearly rules out any foundational role for partiality or concessions to the agent's self-interest. Furthermore, Kant does include positive duties to come to the aid of others.⁴ He distinguishes two types of duties: perfect and imperfect. The obligation not to lie is a perfect duty, unconditionally telling the agent exactly what to do. A perfect duty requires certain specific actions, and rules out others. By contrast, duties of benevolence are imperfect. There is no particular action the agent must perform to fulfil them. The duty to be benevolent requires us to perform *some* benevolent acts, but it does not tell us exactly which ones.

While these duties are imperfect, they still threaten to rule out devoting my resources to my own happiness. Imperfect duties do not outweigh perfect duties, but they presumably seek to fill up the space those duties leave open. Many patterns of behaviour are consistent with observance of all one's perfect duties. The crucial question for Kantians will be: at what point does a personal sacrifice in pursuit of an imperfect duty constitute a failure to treat myself, or some particular other person to whom I have a positive obligation, as an end? Only then can I refrain from aiding others.

This threatens to make Kantian ethics extremely demanding. It is hard to see how donating most of my income to charity would constitute a failure of self-respect, or otherwise violate any positive duty. (An exception would be where I have made a very demanding promise. For instance, if I promise to give all my money to you, then I do have a positive duty not to give it to charity. But then morality's demands would still be extreme.) The question determining the demands of Kantianism is also very similar to the questions raised by sophisticated Consequentialists.⁵

1.1.2. *Contractualism*

The classic contemporary formulation of the Contractualist account of morality is due to T. M. Scanlon: 'An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any system of rules for the general

⁴ McCarty, 'The Limits of Kantian Duty'.

⁵ For a recent attempt to combine Kantian and Consequentialist approaches, see Cummiskey, 'Kantian Consequentialism'.

regulation of behaviour which no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement.⁶ It certainly seems possible that this test will generate quite demanding principles. Indeed, they may be even more demanding than Consequentialism, as Contractualists often give particular priority to the worst-off individuals.

Garret Cullity, arguing from Contractualist premisses, concludes that I ought to do all that I can to save other people's lives until I reach the level below which I would be giving up necessary components of my own well-being.⁷ It seems reasonable for those who are starving to reject any principle permitting me to retain inessential resources rather than meeting their most basic needs.

The crucial question for Contractualist moral theory is thus: at what point do personal sacrifices deprive me of the essential components of a worthwhile life? Precisely the same question arises for Kantians and Consequentialists. Indeed, some philosophers have argued that only Utilitarian principles can pass the Contractualist test.⁸ Even if this is not correct, it does seem likely that Contractualism will be every bit as demanding as Consequentialism.

Another problem for Contractualism is presented by Nagel, who argues that, in the present state of the world, it may be impossible to construct any set of principles that no one can reasonably reject. Any possible principle of aid will either make unreasonable demands on the affluent (from their point of view), or pay inadequate attention to the basic needs of the destitute (from their point of view). If the notion of reasonable rejection is at least partly determined by the agent's own perspective, then any principle will be reasonably rejected by someone.⁹

Contractualists might reply that principles of aid presuppose some background set of entitlements, guaranteeing me free use of my resources. This raises two problems. The first is that, from the fact that I own something, it does not follow that I do not have an obligation to give it away. Arguing from Contractualist premisses, one might conclude that others may not force me to do so. The second problem is that, if our overall theory is Contractualist, then the property rights themselves must be given a Contractualist justification. We need a system of property rights no one can reasonably reject. Any

⁶ Scanlon, 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism', p. 110; see also Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 4. See also Brink, 'The Separateness of Persons, Distributive Norms and Moral Theory'; Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, ch. 4; and Nagel, 'One-to-One'. See also below, Section 8.8.

⁷ I owe this suggestion to Garret Cullity. For a full discussion of similar lines of argument, see Cullity, *The Demands of Morality*.

⁸ Harsanyi, 'Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality?'

⁹ Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, and Nagel, 'One-to-One'. See below, Section 8.8, for further discussion of these issues.

system where property rights are very unequally distributed will be rejected by those who miss out.

Jeremy Waldron offers a similar argument in favour of universal property rights.¹⁰ If property rights are to be justified on the basis of their contribution to human flourishing, then the only defensible system of property rights will provide every person with sufficient property to meet his basic needs and control his life. Respect for morally respectable property rights would then involve great sacrifices from those in the developed world, as a justifiable distribution of entitlements would require a great deal of redistribution in favour of the poor.

1.1.3. *Common-Sense Morality*

Some might conclude that extreme demands are an artefact of moral theory. We could avoid them by abandoning moral theory, and confining ourselves to the world of everyday moral intuitions. Unfortunately, problems of demandingness can also arise within the realm of Common-Sense Morality, or everyday moral intuition. In particular, many real world examples expose a tension between the following intuitively plausible principles.

The Principle of Benevolence. When an agent is able to meet the desperate needs of an innocent stranger at negligible cost to herself, she ought to do so.

The Principle of Liveability. It should be possible for an agent to comply with all correct moral principles and still live a worthwhile, flourishing life.¹¹

In short, Common-Sense Morality includes both the thought that there are limits to the demands of morality, and the thought that the demands of morality are largely determined by the state of the world. There is obviously some tension between these two appealing ideals, especially in a world with a vast amount of unmet need.

James Fishkin has argued that any intuitively appealing principle of benevolence will place very great demands on affluent people, given the present state of the world.¹² Similarly, Garrett Cullity argues that, given our ordinary notions of kindness and justice, it is both unkind and unjust for any of us to fail to save a starving child on the other side of the world.¹³ Common-Sense

¹⁰ Waldron, *The Right to Private Property*, esp. ch. 12, and Brock, 'Is Redistribution to Help the Needy Unjust?', p. 57.

¹¹ For discussions of the demands of Common-Sense Morality, see Fishkin, *The Limits of Obligation*; Cullity, 'International Aid and the Scope of Kindness'; Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, pp. 47–80; and Scheffler, *Human Morality*, pp. 17–28.

¹² Fishkin, *The Limits of Obligation*.

¹³ Cullity, 'International Aid and the Scope of Kindness', pp. 8–10.

Morality can place great demands on agents who seek to be benevolent, kind, and just.

At the very least, defenders of Common-Sense Morality must tell us how to balance the needs of others against our own desires and projects. They must address the very same questions as Consequentialists. This is hardly surprising. The intuitive principles of Common-Sense Morality are the starting point for any moral theory. If the tension between Benevolence and Liveability is found in Common-Sense Morality itself, then we should expect similar tensions in any developed moral theory.

1.1.4. *Virtue Ethics*

Similar remarks apply to Virtue Ethics, often taken to be the least theoretical extension of Common-Sense Morality.¹⁴ A plausible account of the virtues must include at least some other-regarding virtues, such as benevolence, kindness, justice, generosity, or charity. If we acknowledge the significance of such virtues, and if we live in a world where the needs of others are great, then we need some assurance that the life of virtue does not make great demands. In a world such as ours, it seems *prima facie* unlikely that the life of the generous person, for instance, will be a comfortable or affluent one. Sophisticated Consequentialism may provide additional resources to explore the limits of the other-regarding virtues.¹⁵

1.1.5. *Egoism*

One final moral theory is Egoism. The Egoist holds that the sole obligation of each agent is to pursue her own self-interest. It may seem obvious that such a theory has no problem with demandingness. Yet some philosophers have argued that a sophisticated form of Egoism is actually very demanding.¹⁶ (See also the discussion in Section 1.4.2.) Moreover, Egoism faces other problems. The suggestion that we have no obligations whatsoever to others can seem extremely implausible. Indeed, many of us find Egoism every bit as alienating as Consequentialism. Every moral enquiry must begin from some undefended assumptions. This book is addressed to those who accept that the needs of others place some moral demands upon us, and for whom one

¹⁴ For an introduction to contemporary Virtue Ethics, see Crisp and Slote, 'Introduction'.

¹⁵ For recent discussions of the relationship between Consequentialism and the virtues, see Crisp, 'Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue'; Driver, 'The Virtues and Human Nature'; and Driver, 'Monkeying with Motives'.

¹⁶ See Brink, 'Self-Love and Altruism', and Persson, 'The Universal Basis of Egoism'.

of the central tasks of moral theory is to balance the competing requirements of the individual's own good and the interests of others. The Egoist answer seems as extreme as Consequentialism, and even less plausible.

1.1.6. *Contractualist Political Theory*

Moral demands also arise in the political realm. They thus pose problems for political theory as well as moral theory. This is most obvious if our political theory is itself Consequentialist. For instance, Utilitarianism is offered as an account of political as well as personal morality. The task of creating a just utilitarian society would obviously be very demanding. Non-consequentialist political theories seem less demanding. However, this appearance can be deceptive.

The most famous contemporary political Contractualist is John Rawls, who defends a very strong doctrine of liberal impartiality.¹⁷ The basic device Rawls uses to generate his principles of justice is the Original Position, where people choose principles to govern their society. This choice is made behind a Veil of Ignorance. The choosers know *what* their society will look like if any given principle is adopted, but not *who* they will be in that society.¹⁸ Suppose that, in a very simple society, there are two groups: the Rich and the Poor. To discover what justice requires in that society, we ask the following question: which principles of justice would a rational person choose, if he did not know whether he himself would be one of the Rich or one of the Poor?

Rawls also stipulates that the participants in the Original Position are *maximizers*. That is, when choosing under conditions of uncertainty, they choose a course of action where the worst possible outcome is at least as good as the worst possible outcome under any alternative course of action.

Although Rawls originally presents his theory as applying within an individual political community, the device of the Original Position can be applied to international political morality. The result is very demanding for citizens of the developed world. For instance, Thomas Carson argues that 'on any plausible interpretation, the original position for the law of nations will yield strongly egalitarian principles for the redistribution of wealth'.¹⁹ Behind the veil of ignorance one would not know whether one would be living in a rich country or a poor one. A Rawlsian will then choose principles of international relations to maximize the position of those in the poor countries.

¹⁷ For Rawls's original theory, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. For Rawls's most recent views on international justice, see Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*.

¹⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 17–22.

¹⁹ T. Carson, 'Utilitarianism and World Poverty', p. 250.

This will require great sacrifices of people in rich countries, so long as they remain at least as well off as the poor. Similarly, Charles Beitz extends Rawls's apparatus to yield a 'global maximin principle'.²⁰

The question facing Rawlsians is thus: at what point will the sacrifices required of those in the developed world bring their standard of living below that of the world's poorest people? Once again, this comes very close to the question asked by sophisticated Consequentialists. Indeed, the resulting theory may be even more demanding than Consequentialism, as the main difference is that Rawls gives greater weight to the interests of the worse off. As many commentators have observed, if we were to replace Rawls's maximin with maximization of expected utility, then we might end up with Utilitarianism.²¹

Rawls might reply that the principles of justice apply only to institutions, not to individuals. They thus cannot place demands on individuals, beyond the requirement to obey the dictates of just institutions. In a world of just institutions, deprivation and poverty could be solved by a modest level of general taxation. The demands on affluent individuals would thus be slight.

The main problem with this reply is that we do not live in a world of just institutions. If our political theory is to offer us relevant advice, then we must move to an impure theory, and ask what individuals should do in a world without just institutions. Two obvious alternatives present themselves. (1) Individuals have an obligation to seek to bring just institutions into existence. (2) Individuals have an obligation to pursue the goals a just institution would pursue. If just institutions would include a welfare state, then in the absence of such institutions individuals must engage in personal charity. These obligations obviously threaten to become very demanding, and we are owed an account of their limits.²²

1.1.7. *Libertarianism*

The central Libertarian idea is that people have absolute, inviolable property rights. Everybody owns themselves, together with whatever they justly acquire, whatever is justly transferred to them by a previous owner, and whatever they produce using their own labour.²³ All politically enforceable rights follow from these property rights. I can *justly* do whatever I want with

²⁰ Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, quoted in Fishkin, 'Obligations beyond Borders', p. 11.

²¹ Harsanyi, 'Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality?'

²² Murphy, 'Institutions and the Demands of Justice'

²³ This view goes back to Locke. The most prominent modern exponent is Robert Nozick (see his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*).

anything I own, so long as I do not actively interfere with anything that you own. If I own all my money, I can do whatever I want with it. It might be *desirable* for me to give some money to the poor. Perhaps I would be a better person if I did. However, justice requires that I be allowed to refrain from giving money to the poor, if I so choose.

Another crucial feature of Libertarianism is what Nozick calls the 'Lockean proviso'.²⁴ This is a limitation on just acquisition, whereby you can acquire something only if you leave 'as much and as good for others'. You cannot justly acquire the last portion of some particular resource, as this would leave nothing for others. However, as Nozick himself realizes, the original Lockean proviso will not work for limited resources, as it would imply that no one could justly acquire anything. For instance, as land is a scarce resource, no one can leave as much land available for others. So no one could ever justly acquire land. Nozick thus reinterprets the proviso as follows: an acquisition is just if and only if it leaves other people *no worse off* than they would have been if the acquisition had not taken place.

It may seem obvious that Libertarians can avoid the problem of demandingness altogether, as their theory appears to generate no positive obligations whatsoever. So long as I do not interfere with other people's exercise of their property rights, I have done all that justice requires of me. Unfortunately, things are not so simple. In the first place, justice is not the whole of morality. Indeed, Libertarians often stress the fact that their theory is merely an account of politically enforceable rights. We do have other moral obligations, but they are not politically enforceable. Libertarian negative rights must be supplemented by an account of our positive moral duties. We cannot assume in advance that this account is less demanding than other theories of benevolence.

A second problem is internal to the notion of Libertarian property rights. Such rights arise only as a result of a just process of acquisition, creation, or transfer. They are thus constrained by the requirements of justice in acquisition, in particular by the Lockean proviso. Furthermore, as Gillian Brock has argued, these 'constraints on legitimate initial acquisition play a *permanent* role in maintaining the legitimacy of property rights'.²⁵ I must exercise my property rights consistently with the proviso grounding those rights. Under the Lockean proviso, as Nozick interprets it, 'whether or not an initial acquisition is justified depends importantly on the scarcity of resources relative to

²⁴ For discussions of the Lockean proviso, see Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 175–82; Wolff, *Robert Nozick: Property, Justice, and the Minimal State*, pp. 107–12; and Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, pp. 110–18.

²⁵ Brock, 'Is Redistribution to Help the Needy Unjust?', p. 53.

those who need them'.²⁶ If my acquisition would leave others without sufficient resources to meet their basic needs, then I cannot acquire full property rights. I may well be entitled to some reward for my efforts, but whether the appropriate reward is a full property right depends largely on the situation of others. Suppose I initially acquire a water hole when they are abundant. Subsequently, all the other water holes dry up. It would now be inconsistent with the Lockean proviso for me to acquire a water hole. I can no longer prevent others from using my water hole, as the condition that legitimized my initial acquisition (namely, the abundance of water holes) no longer applies. The Lockean proviso may thus oblige me to redistribute in times of scarcity. Brock concludes that redistribution to meet the needs of others 'is frequently a necessary condition for our retaining any defensible property rights at all', even on a Libertarian account of those rights.²⁷

To determine whether I can spend my money on myself rather than meeting the needs of others, even Libertarians must balance my preferences against those needs. The resulting theory of property rights may be very demanding. As we saw earlier, this result is not peculiar to Libertarianism. Some element of distributive justice may be an essential feature of any acceptable account of property rights. In practice, the difference between Libertarian and Contractualist accounts of property rights may not be as significant as is often supposed. (See Section 1.1.2.)

Our treatment of moral and political theory has hardly been exhaustive. However, I trust it has been sufficient to demonstrate that the issues addressed in this book should be of interest to all moral theorists, and not merely to Consequentialists. Every theory needs an account of the structure and limits of the demands of morality, especially in relation to the needs of others. Different moral theories are also more similar than is commonly thought. They all suffer from similar tensions, and must all address the same questions.

1.2. Arguments in Favour of Consequentialism

Another reason to explore the resources of Consequentialism is the considerable appeal of the Consequentialist approach. In this section I highlight that appeal by briefly sketching the main arguments in favour of Consequentialism.

The simplest way to motivate Consequentialism is to see it as developing the thought that morality or moral action should be concerned with making

²⁶ Ibid. 55.

²⁷ Ibid. 58.

the world a better place. At the extreme, this argument takes Consequentialism to be true by definition. This seems to have been the view of Moore, who argued that ‘*x* is right’ simply means ‘*x* best promotes the good’.²⁸ A more modest formulation is that, while it is possible to imagine Non-Consequentialist moral theories, the most rational way to respond to any value is to promote it.²⁹ For instance, if we believe that happiness is valuable, then it is rational to seek to maximize the amount of happiness in the world. Consequentialism is thus the most rational moral theory, as it always tells us to promote value. We might support this conclusion using an analogy between moral rationality and individual rationality. On many views of the latter, it is rational for an agent to seek to maximize her own expected utility. By analogy, a moral theory should tell us how a rational agent would behave if she attached equal weight to the well-being of all agents. That is, if she were completely impartial. Consequentialism is the answer to this question.³⁰

Similarly, we might see Consequentialism as a natural account of the central moral values of impartiality and equality. On the face of it, Consequentialism treats all agents perfectly equally, and is thus perfectly impartial.³¹ Consequentialism thus competes with Kantian and Contractualist accounts of impartiality or equality.

A final argument in favour of Consequentialism appeals to the theoretical virtue of simplicity. If we accept that promotion is sometimes a rational response to value, then the simplest moral theory will recommend promotion as a universal response to value.³²

None of these arguments is conclusive. Indeed, they are all highly controversial. Consequentialist accounts of rationality, impartiality, equality, and simplicity have all been challenged, as has the underlying assumption that an acceptable moral theory must be rational, impartial, or simple. Many of these debates will surface again as we explore various Consequentialist solutions. The purpose of this section has merely been to establish that the Consequentialist approach is worthy of full exploration.

²⁸ Quoted in Holbrook, ‘Consequentialism: The Philosophical Dog that does not Bark’, pp. 107–8.

²⁹ The terminology here is borrowed from Philip Pettit, as is the general argument (Pettit, ‘Consequentialism’, pp. 230–3). See also Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 123.

³⁰ Scheffler, ‘Agent-Centred Restrictions, Rationality and the Virtues’, p. 414.

³¹ Crisp, ‘Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue’, pp. 139–40, and Scheffler, *Human Morality*, pp. 108–9.

³² Pettit, ‘Consequentialism’, pp. 236–40.

1.3. Related Objections to Consequentialism

The Demandingness Objection is often linked to several other common objections to Consequentialism. In this section I distinguish these objections and explore their interconnections.

1.3.1. *The Integrity Objection*

Another common objection to Consequentialism is the ‘integrity’ or ‘alienation’ objection. The classic formulation is due to Bernard Williams: ‘how can a man, as a utilitarian agent, come to regard as one satisfaction among others, and a dispensable one, a project or attitude round which he has built his life. . .’³³

Williams suggests that, by requiring every agent to take no more account of her own welfare than of the welfare of others, Consequentialism undermines the *integrity* of the agent’s life. The Consequentialist agent must view every life from the outside, seeing it only in terms of the value it adds to the overall value of the universe. We might refer to this as the impersonal value of a life. The charge is that Consequentialism requires us to view our lives only from the impersonal perspective. Williams suggests that no agent can view her own life in this way and flourish.

Peter Railton expresses a similar objection in terms of *alienation*, which ‘can be characterized . . . as a kind of estrangement . . . resulting in some sort of loss’.³⁴ By requiring us always to adopt the impersonal perspective, Utilitarianism threatens to alienate us from our own lives. If, following Susan Wolf, we define a meaningful life as a life ‘of active engagement in projects of worth’,³⁵ then we might object that no agent who followed Consequentialist moral theory could live a meaningful life, as she would be unable to identify with her own projects.

It is important not to be misled by the term ‘integrity’. This does not refer to a separable valuable component of a good life, or to moral uprightness. Rather, Williams speaks of the integrity of a human life in the same way that we might speak of the integrity of a work of art.³⁶ The integrity of a life is its wholeness, unity, or shape.

³³ Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, p. 116. For an overview of the debate surrounding this objection, see Crisp, *Mill: On Utilitarianism*, pp. 135–53.

³⁴ Railton, ‘Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality’, p. 134. Railton acknowledges that this characterization is ‘very rough’, but it is sufficient for our present purposes.

³⁵ Wolf, ‘Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life’, p. 209.

³⁶ This analogy is drawn from Crisp, *Mill: On Utilitarianism*, p. 136.

The Integrity Objection is logically distinct from the Demandingness Objection. A moral theory could violate integrity without making any strong demands in the ordinary sense. For instance, we might imagine a theory, let us call it Impartial Spectatorism, requiring agents to view the world from the impersonal perspective at all times, but with no obligation to act in the world. Alternatively, a moral theory could be very demanding without violating anyone's integrity. For instance, a theory telling agents to devote their lives to a religious vocation might foster highly unified integral lives, while making great demands on each agent's resources (although this degree of religious devotion might itself become alienating).

Despite their distinctness, however, the two objections are closely related. In the first place, the violation of integrity is a striking *example* of the unreasonable demands of Consequentialism. A naive Consequentialist might argue that his theory only requires Affluent to give up money, which is not a vital component of human flourishing. A Marxian Consequentialist might even suggest that Affluent is better off without the distractions of consumer society. Opponents of Consequentialism will reply that Consequentialism not only requires Affluent to sacrifice resources she could have devoted to her own projects, it also requires her to be prepared to abandon those projects immediately should they cease to be her most effective way of maximizing the impersonal good.

This is a very significant point. The force of the Demandingness Objection is a function, not only of the number of demands a given theory makes, but also of the moral significance of each demand to the individual agent. Some components or aspects of well-being may be more significant than others. For instance, we may judge the demand that I give up my freedom more harshly than the demand that I relinquish most of my worldly possessions, even though the latter leaves me worse off than the former. (I explore such possibilities at some length in the final part of this book.)

Alternatively, the notion of integrity might provide not only an example of the unreasonableness of Consequentialism, but also an *explanation* of that unreasonableness. Why does Consequentialism make such demands? Because it ignores the moral significance of integrity. Consequentialism makes extreme demands because it requires us always to view the world from the impersonal perspective, and ignore our own personal point of view. This is unreasonable because, unless we are allowed to view the world from a perspective granting special weight to our own concerns, we cannot live recognizably human lives.

1.3.2. *Separateness of Persons*

Another common objection to Consequentialism is that it ‘ignores the separateness of persons’.³⁷ In other words, Consequentialism pays insufficient attention to the fact that each person has a separate and unique life to live. For instance, traditional Utilitarianism seeks to maximize the sum total of hedonic units. It is uninterested in how these units are combined into lives, and is thus willing to sacrifice one person’s life to provide a small amount of happiness to a large enough number of people. Because it ignores questions regarding the distribution of utility across lives, Utilitarianism permits unacceptable levels of uncompensated sacrifice, and pays inadequate regard to the separateness of persons.

Taken to the extreme, this objection would rule out all redistribution and all obligations to come to the aid of others. After all, uncompensated sacrifice occurs whenever a moral principle requires one agent to give something up to further the interests of another.³⁸ Such an extreme position does not seem plausible. The complaint against Consequentialism cannot be simply that it requires the agent to balance her own needs against those of others. Every plausible moral theory involves some such balancing. Rather, the objection is presumably that Consequentialism offers an inaccurate account of this balance. The complaint is not that Consequentialism makes demands, but that it makes too many demands, or the wrong demands.

The integrity and separateness objections are clearly related. Part of what it is to see one’s life as an integrated whole is precisely to see it as distinct from the lives of others. The two notions are thus two sides of the same coin. If Consequentialism ignores one, then it is not surprising that it overlooks the other.

At this point we need to ask two questions: (1) how should agents balance their own interests against those of others, and (2) how might Consequentialism balance them? Until we have answered these questions, we cannot assume that Consequentialists cannot provide an adequate account of the balance between the agent’s own interests and the impersonal good. The main task of this book is to seek answers to these two questions, and to demonstrate that the Consequentialist solution is acceptable.

Once again, we can see this complaint as providing a striking *example* of the unreasonable demands of Consequentialism. Consequentialism requires the agent to ignore the fact that her life is separate from the lives of others.

³⁷ This phrase appears to originate with John Rawls (see his *A Theory of Justice*, p. 27). For evaluations of the objection, see Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, pp. 271–87; Brink, ‘The Separateness of Persons, Distributive Norms and Moral Theory’; and Brink, ‘Self-Love and Altruism’.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 154.

The notion of separateness also *explains* the failure of Consequentialism. Consequentialism demands too much because it ignores the separateness of persons. Lacking an adequate theory of human nature, Consequentialism cannot even see why its demands are unreasonable. It places unreasonable demands on moral agents simply because it does not understand what moral agents are like.

This line of argument suggests two further questions. Can one acquire an adequate understanding of humanity, morality, and agency and still be a Consequentialist? If so, what form will one's Consequentialism take? This book seeks to motivate an affirmative answer to the first question by exploring several possible answers to the second.

1.3.3. *The Transcendental Objection*

A more basic objection to Consequentialism is that, because it ignores the separateness of persons, it fails to count as a moral theory at all. Adequate moral theorizing must proceed from the standpoint of practical reason, which requires certain assumptions about human agency. These assumptions are inconsistent with Consequentialism. For instance, Christine Korsgaard's defence of the Kantian concept of the person might become an attack on Consequentialism in general, if it can be shown that Consequentialism cannot accommodate any substantive notion of personal identity and agency.³⁹ (Korsgaard's argument is outlined in Section 1.4.2.) John Cottingham raises a similar objection when he argues that 'any ethic which requires people to be agents . . . must on pain of absurdity permit agent-related partialism'.⁴⁰ If Consequentialism forbids such partialism, then it cannot be taken seriously as a moral theory.

In some ways this is a deeper objection than the others we have considered, as it denies the very idea of a Consequentialist moral theory. However, the Consequentialist response will be the same. If we can show that Consequentialists need not ignore the separateness of persons, or any other central feature of agency, then we will have dissolved the transcendental objection. We must ask how someone viewing the world from the standpoint of practical reason might construct a Consequentialist moral theory.

³⁹ Korsgaard, 'Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency'.

⁴⁰ Cottingham, 'Partiality, Favouritism and Morality', p. 365.

1.4. Methodology, Metaphysics, and Meta-Ethics

It has become fashionable to precede any substantive ethical discussion with an extensive and apologetic methodological discussion—the assumption apparently being that the business of talking about ethics stands in need of justification. I find this practice puzzling. The only justification for talking about ethics is the belief that one has something worthwhile to say. This seems to be a perfectly adequate justification. If one has anything worthwhile to say, then it is superfluous to preface it with an elaborate defence of the claim that there might possibly be some worthwhile things to be said about ethics. Better, surely, simply to present one's substantive claims or arguments and hope that others find them persuasive or helpful. As Derek Parfit puts it, the only convincing way to demonstrate that it is possible to make progress in ethical discussion is to make such progress.⁴¹

Accordingly, I aim to say as little as possible by way of methodological introduction. I shall confine myself to a few brief general comments, before discussing three particular issues. As far as possible, I seek to avoid any specific meta-ethical commitments. My methodology is similar to Sidgwick's 'philosophical intuitionism'.⁴² I begin by considering a range of pre-existing moral theories. I then test these against certain general theoretical standards which I believe any acceptable moral theory must meet, as well as against our intuitive responses to particular cases (both actual and possible). If the standards and intuitions I use seem likely to be controversial, I attempt to justify them by appeal to less controversial assumptions, or to ground them in general considerations regarding the nature of morality, rationality, and agency. At some point, I reach assumptions I do not defend. I simply try to state these as clearly as possible, and then trust that the reader shares them to a sufficient degree to find my argument persuasive. The resulting theory should be judged comparatively and as a whole: does it provide a more plausible and satisfying account of our moral obligations than its rivals?

1.4.1. *The Role of Hypothetical Examples in Ethics*

Throughout this book I make extensive use of simple examples or thought experiments. These are used to clarify our intuitions, to explain various theories or distinctions, and to tease out the implications of a given theory. The assumption behind this strategy is that one test of the adequacy of a

⁴¹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. x.

⁴² Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, ch. 13. See also Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, pp. 68–9, and Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, ch. 6.

moral theory is its intuitive appeal. Furthermore, my use of hypothetical examples reflects my belief that an adequate moral theory must meet two distinct criteria. Most obviously, it must give the right moral answers in particular actual cases. A theory failing to conclude that the Holocaust was wrong would be inadequate. However, it is not enough to stumble across the right answers in real cases. We also want a moral theory to explain why those answers are right. It should give the right answers for the right reasons. The judgements of an adequate moral theory should be reliably or robustly accurate. For instance, a theory that told us that the Holocaust was wrong because all and only those actions performed by Germans were wrong would not be adequate. Hypothetical examples expose an unreliable theory. Imagine that the Holocaust had been carried out by the English. Would this make it morally acceptable? Obviously not, but the theory we are considering would say that it did. Failure to give intuitively plausible responses to hypothetical examples is thus a sign that a theory has limited explanatory power.

I am aware that the use of examples in ethics is not uncontroversial. We need to be wary of placing too much weight on intuitions, especially those relating to fantastical examples. However, it is hard to see how ethics could be pursued at all without some reference to intuitions or examples. It is also worth noting that the examples discussed in this book are hardly fantastical, at least not by the standards of contemporary analytic philosophy. Most of the theorists whose work I discuss in this book make extensive use of intuitions and examples themselves. It thus seems entirely fair to test their theories against new hypothetical examples.

1.4.2. *Metaphysical Assumptions*

I seek to keep my metaphysical assumptions to a minimum. In particular, I try not to rely upon controversial theses regarding human nature, personal identity, or the concept of the person. As a result, I put to one side various metaphysical defences of Consequentialism. Two such defences are especially prominent in the literature. Both seek to defend Consequentialism against the charge that it ignores the separateness of persons, by denying the metaphysical significance of that separateness. The first such argument is based on Derek Parfit's Reductionist account of personal identity.⁴³ The Reductionist claims that there are no persons, at least not in any metaphysically significant sense. There are only experiences standing in various relations to one another. Parfit argues that, if Reductionism is true, then the boundaries between one

⁴³ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 321–47.

life and another are much less morally significant than we commonly suppose. The fact that it glosses over those boundaries thus constitutes a point in favour of Consequentialism, rather than an objection to it.

The second metaphysical argument in favour of Consequentialism is provided by what David Brink dubs Metaphysical Egoism. This view ‘insists that we ought to modify our pre-theoretic understanding of self-interest on metaphysical grounds’.⁴⁴ Instead of seeing the interests of different agents as separate and conflicting, we need to recognize that they are interrelated. Brink identifies this view with both the Greek Eudaimonists and the late-nineteenth-century British Idealists.⁴⁵ According to T. H. Green, whom Brink identifies as a leading historical proponent of the view, ‘the proper conception of self-realization involves the good of others as a constituent part’.⁴⁶ In other words, ‘when each is engaged in proper self-realization, there can be no conflict or competition of interests’.⁴⁷ Like Parfit, Brink argues that the difference between intrapersonal continuity and interpersonal continuity is a difference of degree not one of kind. It follows that ‘the separateness or diversity of persons is not so fundamental’.⁴⁸

I agree that there is much to be said in favour of these forms of argument. In Part Four of this book I utilize a number of observations drawn from the broad tradition Brink identifies. However, it is not advisable for Consequentialists to place too much weight on these metaphysical arguments, as they rest on controversial claims of two sorts. The first controversy surrounds the metaphysical claims themselves. Opponents of Consequentialism may simply deny that, for instance, Reductionism is an acceptable account of personal identity. Indeed, they may argue that only someone with the impoverished world view of a Utilitarian could find such an account metaphysically plausible.⁴⁹

The second area of controversy is the relationship between metaphysics and morality. Philosophers disagree about the significance of metaphysical debates for moral theory. Parfit argues that moral theory builds on metaphysics. Changing our metaphysical views thus affects our evaluation of competing moral theories. Others, notably John Rawls, defend the view that moral theory is independent of metaphysics.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Brink, ‘Self-Love and Altruism’, p. 124.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 124–52.

⁴⁶ Paraphrased in *ibid.* 133. See also Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*.

⁴⁷ Paraphrased in *ibid.* 135.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 142.

⁴⁹ For a summary of the range of contemporary views on personal identity, see Baillie, ‘Recent Work on Personal Identity’.

⁵⁰ See, in particular, Rawls, ‘Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical’, esp. p. 233, and Rawls, ‘The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus’, esp. pp. 6–7. For discussions of the difference between Parfit and Rawls on this issue, see Stern, ‘The Relation between Moral Theory and Metaphysics’, and Scheffler, ‘Ethics, Personal Identity, and Ideals of the Person’.

A prominent example of the Rawlsian approach is Christine Korsgaard's reply to Parfit.⁵¹ Korsgaard grants the Reductionist claim for the sake of argument, but denies that it is inconsistent with Kantian ethics. The foundation of her argument is a distinction between two perspectives.

The Perspective of Theoretical Reason. This is the appropriate standpoint from which to embark on enquiries into what there is, such as metaphysics. In such an enquiry, we seek necessary preconditions for the possibility of experience. In other words, we ask: what would need to be the case for there to be any experiences at all, and what presuppositions are required for scientific, empirical inquiry?

The Perspective of Practical Reason. This is the appropriate standpoint from which to embark on enquiries into how we should act, such as moral philosophy. In such an enquiry, we seek necessary preconditions for the possibility of action. In other words, we ask: what would need to be the case for there to be any morally assessable choices at all, and what presuppositions are required for rational deliberation?

Korsgaard claims that some concepts are relevant to both perspectives, as they are used in both metaphysics and moral philosophy. The concept of personhood is a classic example. However, this concept plays different roles at the different levels. In particular, persons may be dispensable at one level and indispensable at the other. Parfit's metaphysical Reductionism establishes, at best, only that we can do metaphysics without granting the existence of persons. It does not follow that we can do moral philosophy without positing their existence. In fact, Korsgaard claims, we cannot. The business of deliberation requires the presupposition that one is an agent capable of making choices and carrying out plans. This presupposition commits one to the existence of persons. Reductionism is not an option from the standpoint of practical reason. It is, therefore, no objection to Kantian ethics that it requires us to posit the existence of persons, as such a commitment is an inevitable part of any acceptable moral theory.

This debate is complicated and controversial. It also tends to track disagreement about moral theory. For instance, Utilitarians such as Parfit tend to argue that metaphysics and morality are closely related, whereas Kantians side with Rawls and Korsgaard. A defence of Consequentialism based on Parfitian claims regarding the relationship between morality and metaphysics is thus unlikely to convert Non-Consequentialists.

⁵¹ Korsgaard, 'Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency'.

Accordingly, I propose for the sake of argument to grant the following claims: (1) there are persons; (2) persons are distinct in a metaphysically significant way; (3) the interests of persons, while interrelated, are separate, and often come into conflict; and (4) all these features of persons are morally significant. The questions I wish to address in this book are: can Consequentialism accommodate these common claims about persons, and if so, what will the resulting Consequentialist moral theory be like?

1.4.3. *Some Remarks on Well-Being*

Consequentialism, as I have formulated it thus far, tells us to produce as much as possible of whatever is valuable. It tells us to promote value, but leaves open the question of what is valuable. A full Consequentialist moral theory would combine a Consequentialist account of how to respond to value, with some specific account of what makes outcomes valuable. The former is usually known as our theory of the right, whereas the latter will be our theory of the good.

Discussions of Consequentialism often treat these two components as entirely separable. In other words, we determine the form of Consequentialism independently of determining its content. We then plug our preferred theory of the good into our preferred theory of the right. Recently, some Consequentialists have questioned this assumption of separability, arguing that, even within Consequentialist moral theory, the appropriate response to a value may depend upon its particular nature.⁵²

In this book I seek to be as neutral as possible with respect to theories of the good. For the sake of simplicity, I concentrate on human goods—those aspects of human lives that make outcomes valuable. I do not assume that these are the only valuable features of outcomes, but other possible sources of value are placed to one side. However, at certain points in the argument, it becomes necessary to distinguish different categories of human good. (We have already seen some hint of this in our discussion of the Integrity Objection in Section 1.3.1.) In particular, we will find that we must distinguish the basic necessities of life from more complex goals and projects. Even if there is no clear boundary between the two, we can usually find clear examples of each type. The underlying assumption is that some aspects of human well-being are more morally significant, more urgent, or more meaningful than others; and that these differences should affect our considered response to those components of well-being. This assumption seems extremely plausible in general terms, and Chapter 7 provides an extended

⁵² See esp. Griffin, 'On the Winding Road from Good to Right', and Griffin, *Value Judgement*.

elaboration and defence of it. Indeed, I cannot imagine how we could ever hope to construct an adequate moral theory without attending to these differences.

1.5. Conclusion

Having spent enough time on preliminaries and scene setting, we are now ready to embark on our main task—the evaluation of attempts to construct a reasonable Consequentialist morality. We have seen that this task should be of interest to all moral theorists. The next chapter begins our exploration, by outlining the various possible Consequentialist responses to the Demandingness Objection. These include various departures from the Simple Consequentialism we have considered thus far. Perhaps none of those responses will prove entirely satisfactory. However, when a theory is as prominent as Consequentialism, it is a worthwhile exercise to examine all its theoretical resources, especially those that have been hitherto neglected, even if we cannot as yet find conclusive reasons to use those particular resources. At the very least, a thorough examination of an option we finally reject will deepen our understanding of those we endorse.