

The Demands of Morality
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Aims and structure

The aim of this course is to assess the truth of the *Overdemandingness Objection* (OD). The primary subject of this objection is act-consequentialism, the view that the right thing to do in any situation is the act with the best consequences as judged from an impersonal point of view (it is a further intriguing question whether other moral theories are also subject to the OD – the course leaves this question open). The OD is built upon two pillars: one, that act-consequentialism is extremely demanding and two, that an adequate morality cannot be extremely demanding. Act-consequentialism, in its pure form, requires the agent to promote the good until the point where further efforts would burden the agent as much as they would benefit others. But the situation that determines what would be best overall is far from ideal: today's world involves mass poverty both in the agent's own country and in the world as a whole; the number of people who donate money to charity is very low; and the institutions that might make things better are not too efficient, neither domestically, nor internationally. Hence it seems that if one accepts act-consequentialism, one must devote much of one's resources to humanitarian work or to the support of the institutions that carry out this work. At the same time, most of us have a firmly held belief that this cannot be right, that people should not be required to sacrifice their life on the altar of morality. This is the second pillar of the objection. For this belief seems to ground a general constraint on admissible moral theories requiring them to avoid unreasonable demands. If they do not, we think, these theories should not be allowed to guide our conduct. The OD is an attempt to articulate this constraint.

The OD has the following structure. (1) Consequentialism makes demand D; (2) Demand D is intuitively unreasonable; Therefore, (3) consequentialism makes intuitively unreasonable demands (from (1) and (2)); (4) If a moral theory makes unreasonable demands, then we have reason to reject it; Therefore, (5) we have reason to reject consequentialism (from (3) and (4)). This more detailed structure well illustrates the possible ways of tackling the OD. The strategy of 'denial' rejects premise (1) either because it holds that the premise rests on false empirical facts or because it aims to restructure consequentialism in such a way that it no longer makes the demand. The strategy of 'extremism' rejects premise (4) by trying to undermine or discredit the intuitions that underlie the premise. Although it is also logically possible to reject premise (2), i.e. to claim that the intuition doesn't exist, this is a move that is rarely (if ever) appealed to in the literature. This is for good reason: it is hard to deny that the intuition exists. The version of the strategy of denial that focuses on empirical facts too is convincingly argued against in the literature. Therefore in the seminars we will focus on the restructuring version of the strategy of denial and on the strategy of extremism. In addition, we will consider the most recent attempts to tackle the OD as well as the relation between the role of institution and moral demands.

Format

The course consists of seven three-hour seminars. Each seminar will be framed by a student presentation: in the course of a close reading of the text, the student will guide us through the text (see below), while other participants can join in with their questions and comments. The number of presentations per seminar may vary depending on the

number of registered students. If there is more than one presentation scheduled for a seminar, we will schedule presentations in such a way that they correspond to the structure of the topic discussed. We will also try to introduce material and ask questions in a way that aims to impose useful analytical structure on the readings and issues.

Requirements

Students registered for the course are required to give presentations and write one term paper. Presentations should have an analytical structure, setting out the arguments employed in the text and making critical remarks, suggestions related to the arguments. Topics for the term paper must be clearly related to the issues discussed in the seminars. Each student should write an argumentative essay of not more than 20 pages (12 point, Times New Roman, double spaced) and submit the paper not later than three weeks after the course has ended (March 9). Seminar participation, including presentation will be worth 50% of the final grade; the term paper will be worth 50% of the final grade. Participation in seminars is strictly obligatory, given the few number of occasions we will meet.

Topics

First seminar: the objection. Consequentialism is an extremely demanding theory, therefore it cannot be accepted. Different ways of putting this point. Relation to other similar objections.

Bernard Williams: 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' in. Smart, J. J. and Williams, Bernard: *Utilitarianism, For and Against*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973

Susan Wolf: 'Moral Saints' in. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 79 No. 8. (Aug. 1982), pp. 419-439

Second seminar: the strategy of extremism. This strategy accepts that consequentialism makes intuitively unreasonable demands, but seeks to undermine or discredit these intuitions. Two questions. One is whether our intuition concerning overdemandingness really rests on such cognitive, emotional and other failures of reasoning, and even if it does, whether this really matters.

Shelley Kagan: 'Does Consequentialism Demand Too Much?' in. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13:3 (Summer 1984), pp. 239-254

Peter Singer: 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), pp. 229-243

Torbjörn Tännsjö: *Understanding Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Theory*, Chapter 2, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Third seminar: the strategy of restructuring I. Two approaches will be considered. Two-level consequentialism distinguishes between the criterion of right action, and the decision-procedure for acting rightly. And, for empirical reasons, recognizes that act-consequentialism may not be the best decision-procedure if one wants to maximize good consequences. Rule-consequentialism holds that an action is right, if and only if, it is called for by a set of (actual or ideal) rules the following/acceptance/internalization of which by everyone (or nearly everyone) would result in at least as good consequences

judged impartially as any other. We will discuss the pros and cons of these theories from the point of view of the OD.

Peter Railton: 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality' in. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 13, no.2. (Spring 1984) pp. 134-71

Brad Hooker: 'Rule Consequentialism' in. *Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Chapter 10, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000

Fourth seminar: the strategy of restructuring II. Two further instances of the strategy will be discussed. One argues that we should build limits into the structure of consequentialism, the other claims that the problem with consequentialism is not that it demands too much, but that its demands are unfair. Again, we will see the pros and cons of these theories from the point of the DO.

Samuel Scheffler: 'Prerogatives Without Restrictions' in. *Philosophical Perspectives*, Ethics, 6 (1992), pp. 377-397

Liam Murphy: 'The Demands of Beneficence' in. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 22 (1993), pp. 267-292

Fifth seminar: a priori arguments. Most recently a new kind of attempt to tackle the OD has surfaced in the literature. One argues that in recognizing consequentialist requirements we commit ourselves to presuppositions that establish limits to those very requirements. The other claims that the OD must presuppose the truth of prior and independent breaks with consequentialism. We will see how decisive these arguments are.

David Sobel: 'The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection' in. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 7:8 (September 2007)

Garrett Cullity: 'Demandingness and Arguments from Presupposition', Manuscript

Sixth seminar: morality, reasons, and overridingness. So far we have only dealt with the content of moral demands. Now it is time to turn to their stringency: how strong the reasons they give rise to are. For if they are not strong, it may not be a problem that their content is overdemanding.

Sarah Stroud: 'Overridingness and Moral Theory' in. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998), pp. 170-189

Paul Hurley: 'Does Consequentialism Make Too Many Demands?' in. *Ethics* 116 (July 2006), pp. 680-706

Seventh seminar: moral demands and the role of institutions. According to Rawls, principles of justice apply only to institutions, more precisely, to the basic structure of society. And one, perhaps the most important ground for this 'moral division of labor' is the claim that in this way people will be left free to pursue their own projects in life. Our

question will be how this claim is related to the DO, and how successful it can be in tackling the DO.

Thomas Nagel: *Equality and Partiality*, Chapter 6

Liam Murphy: 'Institutions and the Demands of Justice' in. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27:4 (Autumn 1998), pp. 251-291

Notes on literature

- Introductory literature gives an overview of issues to be discussed and more. Here are two suggestions:

Tim Mulgan: *Understanding Utilitarianism*, Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007, Chapter 5

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong: 'Consequentialism' in. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006

- *Philosophers' Imprint* is an online, free publication. Just google it.
- *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is an online, free publication. Just google it.
- Cullity's ms is attached in doc.
- All other articles and books are available in the SU Library, most of them online.
- If nevertheless, you can't find something, there will be a copy of the course literature available in the Philosophy Department's expedition office from Wednesday, 21 Jan.

Schedule

Monday - Wednesday 13-16 in room D263

Thursday 10-13 in room D255 and 14-17 in room D263

Friday 10-13 in room E371 and 14-17 in room D263