Editorial

Marcel van Ackeren* and Simon Derpmann

Introduction to the Special Issue on Demandingness in Practice

https://doi.org/10.1515/mopp-2019-0010

Moral considerations and considerations of personal well-being form a central part of our evaluative outlook, because we make constant use of them in assessing our individual or collective actions and in judging persons or politics. We do not adopt these two perspectives alternatively, but jointly, and so the question arises whether they can conflict and, if so, what these conflicts would mean for our theories and practices. About fifty years ago, a debate about the possibility, nature, and significance of conflicts between morality and personal well-being gained momentum. The core issue in this debate — what moral theories can reasonably demand from agents — engenders controversy about the limits of moral obligation. Many philosophers argue that normative moral theories that make excessive demands should be rejected or substantially revised (for example Wolf 1982; Railton 1984; Scheffler 1992). This is the idea of *demandingness objections*.

The debate on demandingness objections is a distinctly modern debate, in so far as many of the modern philosophers who raise a demandingness objection assume that this is a problem only for a certain relatively recent type of normative theory, namely consequentialism. However, initial versions of demandingness objections in the works of Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf do not only take consequentialist ethics to be problematically demanding, but also raise concerns about Kantian moral theory. The debate in recent years is not defined by a rather narrow focus on consequentialism, but it applies demandingness objections to contractualism (Ashford 2003; Hills 2010), virtue ethics (Swanton 2009), and deontology, particularly Kantian deontology (van Ackeren and Sticker 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Demandingness objections pertain to normative theories and thus it is not surprising that the following four main strands of the debate concern metaethical issues.

***Corresponding author: Marcel van Ackeren,** Philosophy, Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, Oxford, UK; CIBSS – Centre for Integrative Biological Signalling Studies, Freiburg, Germany, E-mail: Marcel.vanAckeren@philosophy.ox.ac.uk
Simon Derpmann, Philosophisches Seminar, WWU Münster, Münster, Germany, E-mail: simon.derpmann@uni-muenster.de

First, recent work focuses on the meaning of the fundamental concept of the debate, namely demandingness. Each and every position within the debate on overdemandingness, whether arguing in favor of (for example, Scheffler 1992) or against a demandingness objection (for example, Goodin 2009), draws, at least implicitly, on some conception of demandingness. For demandingness is the very thing that the one group considers to become a problem at some threshold, while the other group believes that demandingness cannot rise to such a level that it necessitates changing the theory or demand in question. Thus, we need an account of demandingness in order to understand what we are talking about when arguing in favor of or against overdemandingness and objections to obligations and theories. For a long time, the debate seemed to have agreed that demandingness is all about cost to the agent. This standard view was so dominant that much of the literature more or less presupposes it rather than discussing alternative views. But recent theories have challenged this standard account in two ways. The first challenge does not deny that demandingness is about costs, but attacks the standard account by arguing that it is not justified in singling out the agent's cost because the agent's costs alone have no special normative significance, except as a factor influencing the overall and impersonal good (see Sobel 2007). The second challenge argues that demandingness is not only a matter of costs, but exclusively, or at least also, a matter of the restriction of options (see Benn 2016) or difficulty (McElwee 2016; Chappell 2017). Both challenges are not unanswered (against the first one see Haydar 2003, against the second one van Ackeren 2018).

Secondly, much recent meta-ethical work is concerned with the different versions of demandingness objections (see McElwee 2018) and the question whether there is a demarcation line between acceptable demandingness and unacceptable overdemandingness, and, if so, how we can define and explain it. The variety of demandingness objections — and with it the different accounts of overdemandingness — has increased: For example, demandingness is said to become critical, that is, excessive, if compliance with a moral requirement[1]

(i) reduces the agent's well-being below the absolute threshold T, or
(ii) reduces the agents well-being by a loss L that is too big, or
(iii) does not yield a benefit that is X times higher than the cost to the agent.

Thirdly, the problem of demandingness raises important questions that can be answered without presupposing any position concerning the distinction between

1 The following distinction is taken from the valuable discussion by Hooker (2009, pp. 136 f.) which partly, that is, for (i) and (ii), draws on Murphy (2000, pp. 20 f.). (iii) is proposed by Scheffler (1992, chs. 1–3).

acceptable demandingness and overdemandingness. One issue is the relativity of demandingness. Samuel Scheffler argues that the 'degree of a moral theory's demandingness is a function of a number of closely related factors' and that restrictions and costs are two factors that are 'especially important' (Scheffler 1992, p. 98). But, unfortunately, he does not specify how this is so and how these factors relate to one another. Recent studies (Woollard 2016; Carbonell 2016) try to fill this gap by showing how the context in which an agent has to comply with moral requirement influence the demandingness of the compliance or how the knowledge of the agent and other agent-relative factors bear on demandingness. Another important question in the debate is whether demandingness as a conflict of a moral requirement with the well-being of the agent has to be seen as a conflict of reasons or even a conflict of different kinds of reasons. Especially Raz (1999) challenges the idea that moral reasons are a class of reasons that is fundamentally different from non-moral reasons. Raz's view does not only concern the adequate conception of the possibility and nature of the conflict, but also the question what is rational to do in a case when complying with a moral requirement is not contributing to the well-being of the agent.

This touches on the fourth strand of the meta-ethical discussion of demandingness and overdemandingness, namely the exploration of the relation of demandingness to other central metaethical concepts and debates. There is the aforementioned debate on the (rational) authority of morality, or the debate of so-called moral rationalism (see for example Dorsey 2016). Also the relation of (over-)demandignenss and supererogation is discussed more intensely. Studies on supererogation (Dorsey 2011; Benn 2016; Archer 2016) point out that most accounts of supererogation (see the overview in Archer 2018), like Urmson's (1969) classical one, are based on the notion of demandingness or self-sacrifice by arguing that actions which are overly demanding become supererogatory instead of obligatory. This bears some resemblance to the relation between overdemandingness and ought-implies-can. In both cases a normative judgment is challenged because of what it asks of the addressees of the norm (see van Ackeren and Kühler 2016).

So much for the meta-ethical side of the debate on demandingness and related objects against moral theories. But demandingness objections do not only stir up this part of ethics which is hard to isolate from the perspective of normative or practical ethics. For quite some time, a large portion of the debate reacted to Singer's (1972) 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' by focusing on one duty that was believed to be highly demanding, namely the duty of beneficence in the face of global poverty (see Unger 1996; Cullity 2004). But, like giving up the focus on consequentialism as the target theory, recent literature has started to expand its scope by considering the demandingness of other, or more

specific, duties, for instance duties concerning refugees (Owen 2016), future generations (Mulgan 2006), climate change (Berkey 2014), and animals (Hills 2010).

This special issue wants to contribute to the debate on demandingness as it pertains to various fields of practical philosophy. There are a number of reasons for doing so.

The first is that this debate is worthwhile on its own. Given the pervasiveness of moral considerations and their potential conflict with the perspective of well-being, demandingness and overdemandingness occur in virtually all fields of moral agency, but they occur in different shapes calling for different analyses. Given the high context-sensitivity of demandingness, there is also reason to believe that debating demandingness in practice is an ongoing task, because the moral challenges have changed since Williams raised the integrity objection, and this is not only so because our knowledge of the world has changed but the world itself has changed as well.

The second reason is that discussing various cases of demandingness should give us a clearer picture about the phenomenon, its plurality of manifestations, similarities and also its importance. While the meta-ethical and the practical strands of the debate on demandingness are worthwhile on their own, there is a tight interconnection that remains insufficiently exploited. One the one hand, the metaethical debate cannot do without the discussion of concrete cases. Pointing to the plurality and importance of demandingness in our real individual and collective lives, instead of inventing fictive and outlandish cases that aim at triggering specific intuitions, supports the claim that the corresponding meta-ethical and normative debates are about something that matters and that they are not only self-serving. On the other hand we can expect that the development of recent work on the meta-ethical side can foster new discussions and solutions in normative and practical ethics. The concrete cases of demandingness in applied moral and political philosophy do not merely pose a playing field for moral philosophers looking for flaws in general theories. They call for moral assessment in their own right.

The special issue is comprised of five contributions highlighting specific dimensions of the debate on demandingness for concrete spheres of moral deliberation.

Anna Hartford focuses on the question how much a moral agent ought to know. Moral agents may be held responsible for failing to gain knowledge about facts that are morally relevant to their actions. However, culpability for ignorance is dependent on an agent's epistemic situation. We may be less blameworthy for not entirely overseeing the contexts and consequences of our actions, if they were exceptionally hard to determine. Our epistemic position regarding

the impact of our actions and omissions is fundamentally changed by the radical advancements in information technology of the past decades. Given that we have access to a vast amount of information on the remotest subjects, we may also be more culpable for our morally relevant ignorance than ever. Hartford argues that this assessment of our increased culpability appears appropriate at the level of individual cases, but that it is over-demanding when considered at large. She analyzes the complexity of the obligation to know by reference to the problem of the unknown unknown, i. e. of the unawareness of our potentially relevant ignorance. Thus, our obligation to know is accompanied by an obligation to uncover our ignorance. At the same time, our capacities to assess and process information makes this requirement seem extremely demanding. This suggests that there may be a case analogous to excusable ignorance that consists in being confronted with too much information. Hartford's analysis leads to a moderate assessment of the limits of excusability for ignorance.

Matthew Kramer addresses a paradigmatic case that is often brought forward in debates on the counterintuitive implications of consequentialist theories. The rejection of the instrumentalization of a person's welfare as a vehicle for the generation of good consequences often provokes a response pointing to the analogous irrationality of the demandingness of deontological duties. Kramer rejects this response and the objection entailed in it. He does so by invoking a scenario of placatory torture that exemplifies the demandingness of deontological duties. In the discussion of this scenario, in which the administration of torture seems warranted as the only means to prevent considerably worse mistreatment to the person that is subjected to this treatment, Kramer identifies strict deontological obligations to an individual agent that are demanding, but not overdemanding. He insists that the moral impermissibility of placatory torture is absolute, while nonetheless taking into account the moral weight of the consideration of morally relevant consequences.

Alberto Giubilini and Julian Savulescu discuss current controversial public health policies that have a major impact on the well-being of many persons. However, these health norms and policies often confront individual agents with requirements that can be costly. They are demanding to the addressees in various forms and degrees. The authors presuppose that demandingness objections can be plausible in these contexts and explore the different dimensions of demandingness of three possible health policies, and the impact the demandingness has on the discussion of the policies in question: vaccination policies, policies to contain antimicrobial resistance, and quarantine and isolation policies. In all three cases it is argued that public ethics and policies might involve coercive measures as these measures are not excessively demanding and therefore ethically justifiable. In the case of vaccination Giubilini and Savulescu

argue that the demandingness of enforced vaccination is moderated, because the person who is required to be vaccinated benefits from it. In cases were the agents that comply with the measurements do not benefit from the compliance the state should provide incentives (as in the case of policies that limit antibiotic prescriptions) or compensate for high demandingness (as in the case of quarantine and isolation measurements).

Brian Berkey discusses the demandingness of our obligations to address broad and pressing moral problems such as poverty and climate change. There is a reoccurring intuition in debates of these issues that the moral obligations of individuals differ from the obligations of collectives. Tackling these broad moral issues is seen as overly demanding to the individual. Thus, one may maintain that these pressing problems ought to be addressed without committing to demanding individual obligations. Berkey rejects this description of the moral situation. While he accepts the premise that demandingness complaints have normative force, he questions the viability of positions that both avoid commitment to stringent individual obligations and insist that these problems must be addressed in a robust way. He argues that accepting collective obligations to address large-scale moral problems in fact makes it more, rather than less, difficult to resort to demandingness complaints. If collectives are obliged to address these issues, potentially incurring demanding sacrifices, then individuals are at least obliged not to oppose collective measures to comply with this obligation. Thus, the commitment to demanding collective obligations to address global poverty or climate change may be accompanied by commitment to demanding contributory obligations for individuals.

Kian Mintz-Woo takes a view on utility discounting in intertemporal welfare models. As alternative models of discount rates lead to different conclusions regarding the extent of potential claims of future generations towards present generations, the question of the limits of what we morally owe future generations arises. If there are potentials of investing resources to the great benefit of generations in the distant future, we are arguably morally required to do so. However, the cumulative expected benefits of our efforts may turn out to imply extremely demanding requirements posed to current generations. Mintz-Woo argues that positive utility discount rates can be defended normatively. He suggests a principle for utility discount rates that avoids the conclusion that intertemporal considerations are overdemanding to present generations.

As this selection of problems indicates, the idea that particular moral obligations can be deferred by reference to their excessiveness is relevant to quite a number of debates in practical ethics. This type of argument reappears in a wide variety of contexts that may not be subsumable under one rationale. It is plainly not self-evident or deducible from a general principle that — and at what

point — moral obligation reaches its limits, say, when it comes to the demand to reduce one's carbon footprint, to pay for the pensions of the old, to donate a liver, to risk one's job or more over whistleblowing, to testify against a loved one, or even share one's apartment with a stranger in need.

The variety of these problems across different practical domains call for a continued reflection on the limits of moral demands. This special issue makes a small contribution to unfolding a fine-grained picture of demandingness-objections in practical ethics, and thus at linking the meta-ethical debate with concrete ethical problems that deserve more detailed and often interdisciplinary studies.

Acknowledgement: This Study was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) under Germany Excellence Strategy (CIBSS – EXC-2189 – Project ID 390939984).

References

Archer, A. (2016). 'Supererogation, Sacrifice and the Limits of Duty', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54: 333–354.
Archer, A. (2018). 'Supererogation', *Philosophy Compass* https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12476.
Ashford, E. (2003). 'The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism', *Ethics* 113: 273–302.
Benn, C. (2016). 'Over-Demandingness Objections and Supererogation', in M. van Ackeren and M. Kühler (eds.), *The Limits of Moral Obligation. Moral Demandingness and 'Ought Implies Can'* (New York: Routledge), pp. 68–83.
Berkey, B. (2014). 'Climate Change, Moral Intuitions, and Moral Demandingness', *Philosophy and Public Issues - Filosofia E Questioni Pubbliche* 4: 157–189.
Carbonell, V. (2016). 'Differential Demands', in M. van Ackeren and M. Kühler (eds.), *The Limits of Moral Obligation. Moral Demandingness and 'Ought Implies Can'* (New York: Routledge), pp. 36–50.
Chappell, R. (2017). 'Willpower Satisficing', *Noûs* doi:10.1111/nous.12213.
Cullity, G. (2004). *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Dorsey, D. (2011). 'Weak Anti-Rationalism and the Demands of Morality', *Nous* 46 (1): 1–23.
Dorsey, D. (2016). *The Limits of Moral Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Goodin, R.E. (2009). 'Demandingness as Virtue', *Journal of Ethics* 13: 1–13.
Haydar, B. (2003). 'The Moral Relevance of Cost', *Philosophical Studies* 112: 127–134.
Hills, A. (2010). 'Utilitarianism, Contzctualism and Demandingness', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60: 225–242.
Hooker, B. (2009). 'The Demandingness Objection', in T. Chappell (ed.), *The Problem of Moral Demandingness. New Philosophical Essays* (London: Palgrave), pp. 148–162.
McElwee, B. (2016). 'What Is Demandingness?', in M. van Ackeren and M. Kühler (eds.), *The Limits of Moral Obligation. Moral Demandingness and 'Ought Implies Can'* (New York: Routledge), pp. 19–35.
McElwee, B. (2018). 'Demandingness Objections in Ethics', *Philosophical Quarterly* 67: 84–105.

Mulgan, T. (2006). *Future People: A Moderate Consequentialist Account of Our Obligations to Future Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Murphy, L.B. (2000). *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Owen, D. (2016). ‘Refugees, Fairness and Taking up the Slack: On Justice and the International Refugee’, *Moral Philosophy and Politics* 3: 141–164.
Railton, P. (1984). ‘Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (2): 134–171.
Raz, J. (1999). *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Scheffler, S. (1992). *Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Singer, P. (1972). ‘Famine, Affluence and Morality’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (3): 229–243.
Sobel, D. (2007). ‘The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection’, *Philosopher’s Imprint* 7 (8): 1–17.
Swanton, C. (2009). ‘Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Demandingness’, in T. Chappell (ed.), *The Problem of Moral Demandingness. New Philosophical Essays* (London: Palgrave), pp. 104–122.
Unger, P. (1996). *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press).
Urmson, J. (1969). ‘Saints and Heroes’, in J. Feinberg (ed.), *Moral Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 60–73.
van Ackeren, M. (2018). ‘How Morality Becomes Demandingness. Cost Vs. Difficulty and Restriction’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 26 (3): 315–334.
van Ackeren, M. and Kühler, M. (eds.). (2016). *The Limits of Moral Obligation. Moral Demandingness and ‘Ought Implies Can’* (New York: Routledge), pp. 51–67.
van Ackeren, M. and Sticker, M. (2015). ‘Kant and Moral Demandingness’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18: 75–89.
van Ackeren, M. and Sticker, M. (2018a). ‘The Demandingness of Beneficence and Kant’s System of Duties’, *Social Theory and Practice* 44 (3): 405–436.
van Ackeren, M. and Sticker, M. (2018b). ‘Kant and the Problem of Demandingness’, *Kantian Review* 23 (3): 373–378.
van Ackeren, M. and Sticker, M. (2018c). ‘Moral Rationalism and Demandingness in Kant’, *Kantian Review* 23 (3): 407–428.
Wolf, S. (1982). ‘Moral Saints’, *Journal of Philosophy* 8: 419–439.
Woollard, F. (2016). ‘Dimensions of Demandingness’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 116 (1): 89–106.