**Cost and Psychological Difficulty: Two Aspects of Demandingness**

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**Abstract**

The demandingness of a moral prescription is generally understood exclusively in terms of the welfare costs involved in complying with that prescription. I argue that psychological difficulty is a second aspect of demandingness, whose relevance cannot be reduced to that of welfare costs. Appeal to psychological difficulty explains intuitive verdicts about the permissibility of favouring oneself over others, favouring loved ones over strangers, and favouring one’s short-term good over one’s long-term good. There are also significant implications for the morality of addressing severe global poverty.

**Keywords**

Demandingness; Cost; Difficulty; Global Poverty

**1. Introduction**

How much does morality demand of us? How much of our lives can we be required to give over to moral ends? These are not questions merely for the philosophical armchair. They have deep practical import. In a world where preventable suffering through severe poverty is rife, where climate crisis must be urgently addressed, individuals may feel they must do something, but ask themselves: *How much* must I do? Nor need we look to the global scale to appreciate the importance of such questions. A family member falls seriously ill, needing care that is expensive, time-consuming, emotionally exhausting, and could require the disruption or abandonment of life-plans, goals and ambitions. How much must I do?

In this paper, I aim to elucidate this question of how much we must do. When we say that morality can be demanding – and that a moral theory can be *over*-demanding – what do we mean? The standard view that has dominated philosophical discussion is that demandingness is a matter of the *costs to one’s well-being of complying* with morality.

However, this standard view has recently been called into question [McElwee 2016; Chappell 2019]. In this paper, I make the fullest case to date that *difficulty* of compliance is a distinct and equally important second aspect of demandingness. More specifically, I do three things. First, I distinguish skill-difficulty and psychological difficulty, arguing that while the relevance of the former is reducible to welfare costs, the latter is independently relevant. Second, I argue that appeal to psychological difficulty gives the best explanation of intuitive verdicts about the permissibility of favouring oneself over others, favouring loved ones over strangers, and favouring one’s short-term good over one’s long-term good. Third, I argue that the view has significant implications for the morality of addressing severe global poverty, because an extensive range of factors make responding to such poverty much more psychologically difficult than responding to nearby emergencies like Peter Singer’s famous pond case.

Some important preliminaries first. My focus will be on individual obligations: how much does morality ask of *me*? I leave aside important questions about the demandingness of collective obligations: how much does morality demand of *us*?

I use ‘obligation’, ‘requirement’, ’demand’, and ‘duty’ interchangeably. And I will understand ‘wrong’ and ‘impermissible’ as obligatory to refrain from. All these terms should be understood as implicitly prefaced by the word ‘moral’ or ‘morally’ (moral obligation, moral requirement, morally wrong).[[1]](#footnote-1)

We talk both about specific moral prescriptions being demanding, and about moral *theories* being demanding. Single prescriptions may be relatively undemanding taken individually, but together constitute an extremely demanding morality. Consequently, focusing exclusively on individual moral prescriptions risks losing sight of important dimensions of demandingness.

We often talk about a theory or prescription being *over*-demanding – that is, too demanding to be a true theory or a genuine moral requirement. The demandingness *objection* is raised against moral theories. As Liam Murphy describes it, ‘The objection to extreme demands is based on the simple belief that there is a limit to how much morality can demand of people.’ [Murphy 2000: 15] This sounds intuitive. But what does this talk of ‘how much’ – degree of demand – refer to? I argue that a moral theory can be too demanding in at least two ways: the welfare costs to the agent of complying with it are too great for its requirements to be genuine moral requirements; and the difficulty of complying is too great for its requirements to be genuine moral requirements.

A distinct construal of over-demandingness is that morality itself can demand so much of us that we no longer have sufficient reason to comply with it [see Dorsey 2012, Portmore 2011]. I find this picture of the relation between morality and reason unattractive. On our best understanding, morality already takes account of demandingness considerations, and overall judgements of what agents have reason to do, before issuing verdicts about what is morally obligatory. If some act would be morally good, but involves some great burden for the agent, it is often supererogatory (though it would be required were it not for the burden).

Debates about over-demandingness are intertwined with debates about supererogation.[[2]](#footnote-2) The so-called paradox of supererogation issues a challenge to moral theorists: if some action is morally best, why isn’t it morally required? Demandingness considerations provide the principal answer to this challenge. On the account of demandingness I defend, one can offer at least the following two answers to the challenge. Some action may be morally best, yet not morally required because the costs to the agent of performing that action are too high; or because the difficulty of performing that action is too great.

A moral theory which requires us to perform actions that are not even morally best may be described as over-demanding.[[3]](#footnote-3) But my focus here will be on those cases where a theory correctly identifies what is best, and yet may require too much of us.

Section 2 briefly outlines the most familiar aspect of demandingness, the costs to the agent of complying with a theory. Section 3 introduces difficulty as a second relevant aspect of demandingness. Sections 4 and 5 distinguish skill-difficulty from psychological difficulty, arguing that even if the former is not independently relevant to demandingness, the latter is. Section 6 assesses a suggestion that appeal to welfare costs is sufficient to account for all the phenomena. Section 7 argues that difficulty plays a key role in fully understanding the morality of addressing severe global poverty.

**2. Costs of Compliance**

Discussions of demandingness focus almost exclusively on one type of demandingness: a moral theory is demanding if complying with it would be costly to the agent’s well-being. Compliance will make the agent *worse-off*. Liam Murphy, for example, says: ‘we should say that the demand a requirement makes is greater or less depending on the extent of the loss of well-being sustained by a complying agent’. [Murphy 2000: 17][[4]](#footnote-4) Shelly Kagan’s landmark discussion in *The Limits of Morality* frames demandingness *objections* in terms of an ‘appeal to cost’. [1989: 21][[5]](#footnote-5)

Consider Peter Singer’s treatment of obligations of beneficence. [1972] Singer argues that moderately affluent individuals are obligated to forgo all luxuries and give up almost all their spare time and money to helping strangers in desperate need. The common reaction that this would be extremely demanding clearly rests in part on the costs to agents’ well-being were they to comply with Singer’s prescription. As a moderately affluent citizen, complying will leave me with a much lower level of well-being than I would likely have if I needed comply only with a more lax requirement of beneficence. Suppose I live a balanced life working conscientiously at my job, pursuing my hobbies, enjoying healthy relationships with family and friends, striving to be a nice person, and occasionally giving moderately to charity. If Singer is correct, this lifestyle is morally wrong. Instead, I must devote almost all my spare time and resources to helping needy strangers. Living morally acceptably requires giving up many treasured pursuits. From now, I’ll be spending far less time with my nieces and nephews, watching films, eating out with friends, reading novels, and going on holiday. Not only will I have to give away money I intended to spend on my preferred pastimes and luxury items, but I will be spending most of my ‘leisure’ time trying to help people I have never met. I may have to switch jobs, embarking on a stressful and dull career that pays well, so I can donate more.

These prescriptions are demanding indeed – in large part because complying with them imposes significant costs upon my well-being.

**3. Difficulty of Compliance**

Despite the overwhelming focus on costs of compliance in the literature, it is a mistake to think that this is all there is to demandingness. The *difficulty* of complying with a moral theory or prescription is an importantly distinct type of demandingness.

Having to do very difficult things is uncontroversially a paradigm of demandingness. Agents who fail to act well when it is easy to do so are generally more blameworthy than those who fail to act well when it is difficult.

However, might this just be because doing difficult things often involves significant costs to one’s well-being? G. A. Cohen suggests: ‘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.’ [2000: 172][[6]](#footnote-6)

A prima facie reason to believe that demandingness concerns difficulty as much as cost, and is independent from it, is offered by dictionary definitions. Typical definitions of ‘demanding’ are quite different from definitions of ‘costly’, yet almost identical with definitions of ‘difficult’. Both demandingness and difficulty are defined as requiring effort, skill, attention, patience. In contrast, costliness is a matter of detriment, disadvantage, damage, suffering, sacrifice, loss. Despite this, discussions of demandingness give scant attention to difficulty.[[7]](#footnote-7)

I distinguish skill-difficulty and psychological difficulty.[[8]](#footnote-8) Skill-difficulty may only bear on demandingness in virtue of the costs to well-being it involves. Those who argue that difficulty makes no independent contribution to demandingness are perhaps misled by focusing exclusively on skill-difficulty. By contrast, I argue, psychological difficulty has clear independent relevance.

Before considering these two types, we should note an orthogonal distinction between difficulty for an agent and difficulty *tout court*. Playing Francisco Tarrega’s guitar piece *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* is very difficult, requiring great skill and great effort. But for John Williams, who has performed the piece hundreds of times, playing it is not difficult – it is almost second nature. Something may be difficult *tout court* – perhaps in virtue of being difficult for a typical (or otherwise salient) human, yet not be difficult for some specific (skilled, well-practised, physically or cognitively unusual) individual. Or some task may be easy-for-humans in general, but difficult-for-me, if I have a disability.

Both conceptions of difficulty are of clear interest. If we think of morality as a set of rules which equally binds every person, then plausibly, any difficulty threshold for an act’s being morally required will be set by how difficult the action is for a typical agent. But we also want to know how we should feel about a specific individual’s actions, given what was difficult for them. If Alan is an Olympic swimmer, then failing to jump in the lake to save a drowning child merits severe moral condemnation. If Bert is a frail eighty year-old and he fails to jump in, he merits no such reaction.

**4. Skill-Difficulty**

Some task may be difficult by requiring skill. Having skill makes a difference to whether someone can successfully perform an action (reliably) if they try. Williams has the skill to play the Tarrega piece. Charlotte, a talented 16-year old, working towards her grade 7 exam, can make it sound pretty good most times she tries, making few mistakes. It is really difficult for her, however, given her limited skill.

Doing something that is skill-difficult often involves costs to the agent, both in acquiring and exercising the skill. For example:

1. Physical pain. Playing the Tarrega piece requires repeatedly stretching one’s left-hand uncomfortably.
2. Frustration and stress. Mastering the Tarrega piece involves repeatedly making mistakes, which typically elicits frustration. If one is due to perform the piece at the school concert, this may be stressful.
3. Fear of failure. Failing, and the prospect of failing, are frequently unpleasant. The chances of failing are higher for tasks that are skill-difficult.
4. Opportunity costs. Spending so much time practising the difficult piece will mean missing out on many other activities.

However, doing something skill-difficult doesn’t always involve significant costs to the agent. Humans take pleasure both in developing and deploying skill. They say such things as: ‘That was difficult, but I enjoyed it!’, or ‘This is going to be a tricky one – bring it on!’ (It might be annoying when people say these things, but it is perfectly intelligible.)

Suppose I’m finishing a pile of marking, and looking forward to rewarding myself with coffee and a nice, hard crossword. Or I’m looking forward to heading off to the climbing wall to try out a really tricky route. I wouldn’t feel this anticipation, or pleasure when the time comes, if it is a really easy crossword, or if the climb is like walking up a staircase.

It seems plausible then that skill-difficulty in itself doesn’t make a difference to demandingness; rather, it is only when, and because, something’s being skill-difficult imposes welfare costs that it makes a difference.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**5. Psychological Difficulty**

By contrast, what we may call psychological difficulty does have independent impact on (over-) demandingness. One central case of psychological difficulty is demand on our *motivational* capacities. As Richard Yetter Chappell puts it, there are ‘demands placed on our agency, executive control, or willpower’ [2019: 255]. Effort, attention, focus, concentration, patience, and perseverance require the deployment of such willpower.

Doing something that requires significant effort or willpower very frequently involves cost to the agent. It is perhaps for this reason that many authors have thought it enough to treat demandingness solely in terms of costs of compliance, and that many speak interchangeably of cost and difficulty. But, as I will now argue, they are importantly distinct, and the impact psychological difficulty has on blameworthiness, and plausibly on the limits of our moral obligations, cannot be reduced to costs to well-being.

In this section, I argue that appeal to psychological difficulty gives the most convincing explanation of the demandingness of an important group of cases. In the following section, I argue that psychological difficulty helps explain how standard demandingness objections work, and how they can be convincing; and it helps explain how costs to loved ones impact on demandingness.

Marcel van Ackeren has recently argued explicitly that difficulty impacts on demandingness only by affecting welfare costs. [2018] Cases where difficulty does contribute to demandingness always, he claims, involve cost to the agent’s well-being. However, even if this is correct[[10]](#footnote-10), it seems that in many such cases, it is not the degree of cost that explains the degree of demandingness. The felt burdensomeness is better explained by difficulty than by cost. And crucially, it is not the *degree* of costs that explains why blameworthiness is mitigated (and sometimes putative obligation undermined) in many such cases.

Consider the following examples:

Case 1. Raymond has been reading about veganism lately. He is worried about the abuse of animals in food production, and he has learned how going vegan can dramatically decrease his carbon footprint, something he cares deeply about. He has also encountered evidence that going vegan would improve his health. He believes he’d be better off if he went vegan. Despite all this, he is finding it very hard to make the change. He really loves sausages, bacon and cheese.

Case 2. Linda is in an unhappy marriage. She and her husband fight every day, and she regularly feels miserable. The daily fights are adversely affecting the children. Linda knows that leaving her husband will be better for her, and for her children, and probably for her husband too. However, she finds the prospect of leaving after so many years extremely daunting, and feels overwhelmed by the uncertainties of how things will turn out if she does.

Case 3. Aron is stuck in a cave with his arm trapped under a very heavy boulder. There is no one for miles around, and no prospect of rescue. He faces painful death by dehydration. His family and closest friends would be devastated by his death. The only way he can save his life is to cut off his arm with the small knife he has, without anaesthetic.[[11]](#footnote-11)

These cases are designed to share three relevant features:

1. There are strong other-regarding reasons to perform some action, A, that seem to make it the morally best thing to do;
2. Doing A is psychologically very difficult to do (it requires a lot of willpower, effort, courage, striving);
3. Although doing A involves significant short-term costs to the agent’s well-being, it is not *overall* costly to them – if they can bring themselves to do it, they will be better off overall.

I do not insist that in each of these cases the agent is not morally required to perform the difficult action in question – i.e. that the psychological difficulty involved makes the action *too* demanding to be morally required. These are tricky questions in normative ethics, up for grabs in our moral thinking and discussion. Our best verdict may depend on further specification of details of each case. But in each case it is clear that doing A is demanding in virtue of being psychologically difficult, and the degree of difficulty mitigates any blameworthiness for failing to do A.

Cases with this structure constitute a strong prima facie case for believing that psychological difficulty has an independent impact on (over-) demandingness. If doing what is morally best in such cases strikes us as (over-) demanding, this cannot be based on the standard appeal to cost. In these cases, the action in question is not overall costly; rather it is beneficial. So the demandingness appears to lie elsewhere, in the difficulty of performing the act.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**6. Proximate Costs**

Difficulty appears then to do considerable explanatory work in many cases. A defender of the cost-only account of demandingness might try to press her case by noting that there *are* significant costs (*proximate* costs) in each of the cases just outlined. It could be suggested that it is just the degree of these proximate costs that makes the action too demanding, notwithstanding the fact that bearing the costs would be best for the agent overall. So there is no need to appeal to difficulty as a second fundamental factor.

Why might high proximate costs be thought to have disproportionate importance, when compared to costs and benefits which one will accrue in other parts of one’s life?

We can distinguish two variations of this cost-based diagnosis of demandingness:

1. Especially large costs to just *any* time-slice of the agent can mitigate blame;
2. Especially large costs to a *near-at-hand* time-slice of the agent can mitigate blame.

The first variation resembles Scanlon-style contractualism. The contractualist gives special moral weight to the highest burden borne by a single person. [Scanlon 1998] Such burdens generally outweigh, in determining our moral obligations, the aggregated sum of smaller burdens borne by others. It may be wrong to minimise the aggregate sum of costs (or to maximise benefits-minus-costs) if that requires imposing a larger cost on some individual than would be borne by any individual under alternative arrangements. Analogously, the proposal under consideration here is that it can be wrong to demand of agents that they do what is morally best, even though that maximises benefits-minus-costs to them, when doing so requires imposing especially large costs upon some time-slice of themselves.

How should we assess this proposal? A first thing to note is that the analogy with contractualism may undermine rather than support the position. The contractualist typically questions the *inter*personal aggregation of costs and benefits specifically on the basis of the separateness of persons. What *is* appropriate in the *intra*personal case, making sacrifices to one’s own welfare at some time for the sake of greater overall welfare across one’s life, is inappropriate in the interpersonal case: sacrifices to *your* welfare are not redeemed by benefits to *us*, numerically distinct people.

Second, even if the any-time-slice view has some appeal, there seems to be a normative remainder. Significant costs to near-at-hand time-slices seem often to more readily mitigate blame for failure than significant costs to distant-future time-slices. This calls for explanation. *Why* should costs to a near-at-hand time-slice do more to mitigate blameworthiness than costs to later time-slices? They are no more disvaluable. The most plausible explanation, surely, is that for humans, it is in general especially motivationally difficult to impose significant short-term costs upon oneself. Typically, it is *all too easy* to go for short-term benefits even though that isn’t in our long-term interest. Paradigm cases of akrasia involve prioritising short-term goods. We are typically more motivated to pursue close-in-time pleasures, and to avoid close-in-time discomforts.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This general rationale for which costs have special weight in determining blameworthiness and obligation – those costs which are difficult to impose – has considerable explanatory power. There are in fact at least three general categories of costs which seem especially difficult for an agent to impose:

1. Close-in-time costs to oneself compared to later costs to oneself.
2. Costs to oneself compared to costs to strangers.
3. Costs to loved ones compared to costs to strangers.

In each of these cases, we tend to think that blameworthiness and moral obligation are affected.

Consider (2). David Sobel raises a seemingly powerful challenge to standard demandingness objections grounded in an ‘appeal to cost’. A supposed paradigm demandingness objection faces Peter Singer’s claim that the affluent are morally obligated to transform their lives, giving up all luxuries for the sake of aiding the global poor. The objection is that these costs are simply too great for the affluent to be required to bear. But such an appeal to cost may appear unduly selective, or one-eyed. The costs which will befall the poor who will go unaided if the affluent are bound by a more moderate principle of beneficence are even *greater* than the costs borne by the affluent if they comply with Singer’s more stringent principle!

So the appeal to cost that figures in standard demandingness objections simply cannot be that too great costs must not be allowed to befall any individual, or that the total costs allowed to befall people generally cannot be too great. Such a thought would speak against standard demandingness objections, which ‘protect’ affluent agents against very high demands *on them*.

Instead, if standard demandingness objections are to be successful, costs to the agent must have some special relevance, as opposed to costs to just anyone.

There are two ways of developing this thought. The first is that cost to the agent just is a fundamental explanatory category. It is the agent who is being called to action by a moral theory. Costs to them are self-imposed, and that suffices to give such costs a different role in determining obligations than welfare costs to others.

The second way is to offer further explanation of why costs to agents are special. The fact that these costs are self-imposed matters because imposing costs on oneself makes demands on the will; they are almost always more difficult to impose upon oneself than to impose on complete strangers.[[14]](#footnote-14)

So appeal to difficulty here promises to do important explanatory work. It is worth noting that even if we are attracted to the first way – saying that the mere fact that some cost will fall to the agent can disproportionately affect blameworthiness – the second still has independent appeal: the fact that some cost is difficult to impose seems to mitigate appropriate blame.[[15]](#footnote-15) Just focusing on prudence reinforces this. Someone suffering from a drug addiction, or from depression, may fail to do what is in their long-term interest (what will maximise benefits-minus-costs to themselves) simply because of the difficulty of doing so. But precisely because of this difficulty, we tend to think they merit diminished criticism for failing to do what is most prudent or rational.

Now consider (3). Demandingness worries about strongly impartialist moral theories like maximising act-consequentialism concern not only costs to the agent herself, but also the costs that will befall one’s loved ones if one fully complies with the theory. A traditional concern about such theories is the very limited extent to which one is morally permitted to give priority to one’s loved ones over strangers. Loved ones’ well-being is of intrinsic value, and one’s relationship is plausibly of intrinsic value, and fostering that through care, attention, and other favouring behaviour is necessary to secure that value. Nonetheless, from the consequentialist’s impartial point of view, devoting time, energy, money, and resources to strangers in extreme need will just have even more value than devoting these to loved ones. So one is morally required, according to maximising act-consequentialism, to favour these strangers to the neglect of one’s loved ones.

On what grounds might one object that this is too demanding?

The standard appeal to welfare cost to the agent can certainly do some work here. When our loved ones fare badly, we fare badly. One element of this is instrumental: we are distressed when our dearest fare badly. Another, plausibly, is intrinsic: the flourishing of my loved ones just is a part of my flourishing, on some accounts.

But there is more to it than that. It is striking that just as it is motivationally more difficult to impose costs on *myself* than it is to allow costs to befall strangers, so it is more difficult to impose costs (or to allow costs to befall) my loved ones than it is to allow costs to befall strangers. Parents frequently care more for their children than they do even for themselves, and often need to be urged to give their own well-being greater priority instead of constantly putting their children first. Even if parental partiality sometimes runs to excess, the *difficulty* of treating one’s children just like strangers, inputting their well-being into an impartial calculus alongside others, can be extreme.

It is quite understandable in the face of competition between the needs of one’s own child and those of strangers to reject impartiality as too much to ask. Having devoted herself for so long to bringing up her child as best she can, caring for them, making continuous sacrifices for them, having them as the focus of her attention for so long – requiring a parent now, when her child needs help, that she abandon them for the sake of some stranger who happens to need help even more, or for a larger number of people who can be helped more efficiently, appears strikingly demanding. This dramatic switch of a parent’s pattern of practical concern looks extremely motivationally difficult to perform. And, in many circumstances, plausibly too much to be morally required.

In these three ways, we see that some welfare costs are systematically more difficult to impose than others. In framing the demandingness objection simply in terms of an appeal to cost then, we get the shape of the objection wrong. For in many cases it is not the *degree* of cost that explains our intuitions. Although there are welfare costs to the agent, one cannot simply appeal to the magnitude of those costs in order to vindicate our worries about strongly impartialist moral theories, given the greater magnitude of the welfare costs to others. The special motivational difficulty of imposing certain costs – to oneself, to one’s short-term self, and to one’s loved ones – must have a central role in a full account of demandingness.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**7. Responses to Global Poverty**

Most philosophical debate about demandingness has focused on beneficence towards the global poor. Specifically, there has been sustained focus on our dramatically different reactions to nearby emergency cases, such as Singer’s pond case, and to ongoing severe global poverty. It is striking that while in nearby emergency cases, people typically judge that it would be very blameworthy indeed to fail to provide assistance, responses to those who fail to assist the global poor are *far* more lenient. [Unger 1997] Most of those we interact with every day do little to aid those living in severe poverty, yet we do not reproach them as we would someone who allowed a child to drown in front of them when they could easily help.

In this final section, I show that responding adequately to ongoing severe need that occurs at a distance is, for a wide array of reasons, psychologically difficult. If, as I have argued up to this point in the paper, psychological difficulty is an independent component of demandingness that mitigates moral blameworthiness, this implies that agents who fail to respond to distant need are indeed less blameworthy than those who fail to assist in nearby emergencies.

As G. A. Cohen emphasises, giving to charity seems in one way the easiest thing in the world, requiring just ‘a few strokes of the pen’ [2000: 171], or tapping one’s details into a charity website, requiring no elaborate skill.

But we have seen that requiring skill is only one way that something can be difficult. The fact that so few people in the developed world give very much at all to address global poverty [Gabriel 2016: fn1] suggests that there is *something* difficult in giving a substantial amount towards helping the global poor. It is striking that so many of the affluent do so little, despite ample available evidence of an extremely pressing moral issue that they can do something to address. People who would not dream of leaving a child to drown in a nearby pond nonetheless fail to respond to appeals to address the desperate need of the global poor.

In fact, there is a copious array of factors making it much more difficult to respond to the plight of the global poor than to that of a nearby drowning child. Although we can, and often do, recognise (perhaps fleetingly) a compelling case for making substantial donations, staying sufficiently focused on the compelling factors and being motivated to act accordingly, is surprisingly difficult. I will focus on three such features.

Firstly, and most importantly perhaps, the need of the global poor is not presented in the vivid way that a nearby drowning child’s need would be. It is easy to respond to a child in danger of drowning *right in front of one’s eyes*. Responding to the need of the distant poor by comparison requires focus, discipline, determination not to just to be lured back to one’s default perspective. This is especially so once the ongoing plight of the poor becomes part of the ‘wallpaper’, all too easy to ignore as one skips the international news pages and turns to sports coverage, domestic political intrigue or celebrity gossip.

It is more difficult to be motivated to act morally well when morally relevant features of one’s situation are far less salient than the exigencies, pressures and temptations of everyday life. One may be struck on occasion by the plight of the distant poor and the strength of the moral reasons to do more to help, only to be distracted by one’s screaming baby, a mother’s illness, a work deadline to be met, an invitation to a night out with friends, or an advert for the latest gadget.

Someone may argue, ‘Look, once you have read Singer’s article, and followed the argument where it leads, is it really so difficult to respond? Once you have read in the newspaper, or seen on TV, or read in charity leaflets, about desperate suffering you can do something to prevent, are you not then sufficiently aware of the plight of people whom your action or inaction affects?’ But who in the developed world has not, after witnessing such suffering on the TV news, or reading an Oxfam leaflet, or perhaps even after reading Singer’s article itself, had an experience akin to that which Descartes reports in his *Meditations*, and Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, of following rigorous sceptical thinking where it leads, feeling mightily disturbed, but then feeling irresistibly drawn back to the world of our everyday experience, with its commonplaces and saliencies, its ordinary pressures and worries, decisions, attractions, temptations, and so on? All of this seems just so natural that they find their attention all too easily drawn from what struck them so forcibly before, that the considerations which weighed so heavily with them when vivid now appear cold and unmotivating, or are forgotten altogether. [Pogge 2002: 26]

A second major source of difficulty in responding to global poverty is pressure towards conformity with others. As is well-attested within social psychology, we habitually take our cues about appropriate behaviour from those around us, and have a strong tendency to conform with others. Subjects are far less likely to respond to apparent need in cases where others around them are unresponsive. [Latane and Darley 1970; Lichtenberg 2014: Ch. 6] (Such conformity in fact appears a quite general psychological phenomenon – we fail also to respond to strong *self-interested* reasons, e.g. to investigate black smoke billowing in the room, when others around us are unresponsive). [Latane and Darley 1970: Ch. 6] Several factors appear to feed into these inhibitionary effects and reinforce each other. First, diffusion of responsibility: when others are in just as good a position to respond as I am, I may hold off in the hope that others address the issue. Second, we interpret situations by reference to the responses of others. We implicitly reason: ‘No one else is acting. So inaction must be okay.’ Third, we may fear appearing foolish; the one who responds stands out as a candidate for mockery or contempt. [Lichtenberg 2014: 146-7; Latane and Darley 1970; Ross and Nisbett 2011]

All these features are plausibly in play in the case of responding to severe global poverty. The third is exacerbated by fear of feeling like a sucker. The affluent could collectively address global poverty at pretty minimal sacrifice to each, but when others fail to do their share, I may feel a fool, and appear to others as a fool, in proactively taking on others’ share of the burden. In recent years, the Effective Altruism movement, inspired by Singer, has attempted to build a community of like-minded people making altruism a central part of their lives, in an explicit attempt to counteract these strong pressures of conformity.[[17]](#footnote-17)

A third factor lies in the ways people deliberate about assisting the poor, as Iason Gabriel has argued. [2016] People affirm that every human life is of value. They know about severe global poverty. And yet they give very little to organisations aiming to address this poverty.

A major explanatory factor, Gabriel suggests, is that many of the ways humans conduct their practical reasoning, well-attested in experimental psychology (some clearly irrational), constitute a perfect storm militating against helping behaviour[[18]](#footnote-18):

1. Loss-aversion: even when agents think some gain is worth more than some loss, they frequently favour the status quo, rejecting the gain and forgoing the loss. (Endowment effect.)
2. Self-regarding effects are more salient than other-regarding effects.
3. Potential recipients of aid are often presented *en masse*, rather than as identifiable individuals. (Identifiable victim effect.)
4. Those in need of help are often people affluent agents do not readily identify with – they may differ in appearance and lifestyle. As well as being geographically distant, they are ‘socially distant’.
5. Consequences of omissions tend to weigh less heavily than consequences of actions. (Agency effect.)[[19]](#footnote-19)
6. We assign greater weight to actions we perform as individuals, as compared to actions in conjunction with others.
7. Uncertainty: We prefer a ‘sure thing’ over a prospect which is uncertain but has greater expected value. (Risk aversion.)
8. Futility thinking: We view individual efforts to address global poverty as ‘drops in the ocean’. Framing the issue as a single massive problem that individual action can do nothing to address, we are distracted from the very significant good we can each do for a small number of individuals.
9. Depletion thinking: Individuals may think ‘If I help on this one occasion, will I not be committed to helping again on multiple future occasions?’ It may appear that rational consistency requires not helping at all. (This is illusory since, once one has helped substantially, bearing significant costs, there is a clear relevant difference between the old case and the new.)[[20]](#footnote-20)

*All* of these psychological tendencies seem to inhibit the provision of assistance to the global poor. Overcoming such deeply engrained tendencies, maintaining focus on the strength of the reasons to give, and acting accordingly, is difficult, requiring a combination of attention, focus, and willpower. Most of the factors listed here are absent in the Singer’s pond case, but present in the case of giving to aid organisations. Even when we are able to recognise the strength of the case for aiding the global poor, for all the reasons cited above it is strikingly difficult to maintain our focus on that case, and to then act on the compelling reasons we have recognised. Fully disentangling the factors of difficulty from those of cost to well-being may not be possible. But it seems clear that difficulty makes a substantial contribution of its own to the demandingness of responding to distant severe poverty.

How do these empirical observations, about the significant psychological difficulties of giving substantial aid to the distant poor, bear on normative questions about the blameworthiness of affluent agents who fail to respond to the plight of the poor, and their moral obligations of beneficence?

Debate about duties of beneficence often results in a stand-off: between moderates who argue that the severe demands of Singer and Unger are too counter-intuitive to accept, and bullet-biting opponents who argue that ‘our’ intuitions in this area are not to be trusted. Such intuitions may be parochial (widely shared amongst the affluent, but not the global poor) and self-serving (the intuitions conveniently support some more moderate principle of beneficence that better suits the affluent).

The considerations raised in this paper can help us get some traction in this stand-off. If we accept the main normative claim made here, that considerations of psychological difficulty mitigate blameworthiness, then the three sets of factors rehearsed in the present section suggest that people are indeed less blameworthy for failing to assist the distant poor than they would be would be for failing to assist in a nearby emergency.

Are then the very lenient responses we display towards the affluent’s failure to aid the global poor vindicated?

This would be far too quick. Even if we are right to conclude that failure to provide assistance in nearby emergency cases is morally worse than a failure to respond to the needs of the distant poor, this does not establish that the inaction in response to global poverty is morally defensible. We plausibly have a standing moral obligation to look moral matters in the face, to not turn away too readily, to make genuine effort to overcome the sorts of psychological barriers outlined above. In the lives of typical affluent agents, there are ample ‘moral alerts’, affording occasional *flashes* of vivid awareness that grave moral issues are at stake. Someone who makes some regular effort to face up to the plight of the needy, and responds accordingly, may do enough to avoid meriting blame. But those who repeatedly turn the other way, turning their attention to more comfortable matters, do not. Those who fail to aid the global poor because of consistent failure to make efforts to look the issue in the face are blameworthy for their consequent inaction, notwithstanding the psychological barriers. So recognising the role of psychological difficulty in responding to distant poverty, and concluding that it mitigates blameworthiness, does not commit us to claiming that the affluent have an adequate excuse for doing as little as most presently do to address severe poverty.

What about the *moral obligations* of the affluent? On one possible view, psychological difficulty mitigates blameworthiness for failure to respond to the need of the poor, but doesn’t affect duties of beneficence themselves. Another view is that considerations of difficulty can make supererogatory what would otherwise be obligatory. Each of these views is compatible with the main conclusions of this paper. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the second has more appeal.

We should first note that it’s widely accepted that costs to well-being of complying with a putative principle of beneficence affect not just blameworthiness, but also what our moral obligations are. The default view would then seem to be that this second aspect of demandingness, psychological difficulty, likewise affects not just blameworthiness, but moral obligation too.

Moreover, a utopian conception of moral obligation that is wholly detached from actual human psychology is unappealing. What we regard as morally obligatory can’t just be a wish-list, detached from the realities of human motivation. It might be for the best if humans were to be always motivated to do what is morally best without struggle, without internal obstacles. But a morality built around expectations that people act optimally, holding them to levels of rationality and impartiality that they find it extremely difficult to meet threatens to be both unfitting and self-defeating. This would suggest that our best take on duties of beneficence should be sensitive to how difficult the action is for a typical agent.

**8. Conclusion.**

In this paper, I hope to have established that in thinking about moral demandingness – about *how much* we must do for the sake of moral ends – focusing exclusively on welfare costs to the agent constitutes a significant error. Recognising the independent contribution of considerations of psychological difficulty is crucial in (i) understanding and defending standard demandingness objections; (ii) understanding permissible partial concern, and (iii) understanding the morality of beneficence.[[21]](#footnote-21)

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1. For discussion of *non*-moral obligations, see McElwee [2017]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an excellent discussion of the relation between the debates, see Benn [2016]. See also Archer [2018]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If someone claimed I was morally obligated to spend every weekend campaigning for a fascist party, I could reasonably complain that that is too much to ask, even though there are more fundamental objections to the claim. As Richard Yetter Chappell puts it, we can distinguish being something being *too much* to ask from its being the *wrong thing* to ask. [Chappell 2019: 258] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Van Ackeren [2018] explicitly calls the standard view the view that only costs matter to demandingness. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See also Sobel [2007]. Scheffler [1994, 98] states that demandingness is a disparate notion, but emphasises well-being costs and confinement. Murphy concentrates on cost, arguing that confinement is reducible to that. For further insightful discussions of demandingness, see Hooker [2000], Mulgan [2001], Ashford [2003], Cullity [2006], Chappell [2009], Sticker [2021]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Van Ackeren argues explicitly that difficulty is only relevant to demandingness in virtue of contributing to costs to well-being: ‘I will defend the standard view by arguing that difficulty can indeed increase demandingness, but only insofar as it comes in the form of extra costs.’ [2018: 317] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Besides Cohen [2000] and van Ackeren [2018], relevant discussions include Nagel [1981], Eriksson [1997], McElwee [2016], Chappell [2019]. Some authors, e.g. Lichtenberg [2014], equivocate between cost and difficulty, speaking as if the considerations were interchangeable. For explicit discussion of the view that blameworthiness can depend on degrees of difficulty, see Nelkin [2016]. For the view that wrongness can depend on difficulty, see Eriksson [1997]. Chappell [2019] suggests demandingness should be understood *exclusively* in terms of difficulty (the relevance of cost is reducible to the relevance of difficulty). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Difficulty is somewhat neglected in philosophy, though see Bradford [2015], Hirji [2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Or when it involves psychological difficulty – see the next section. Another possible aspect of difficulty which I do not discuss here is low chances of success (even if one tries). Just as someone doesn’t merit blame for failing to do the impossible, so they don’t merit blame simply for failing to successfully perform some action they cannot reliably perform. They may, of course, merit blame for failing to *try their best* to do it. See von Kriegstein [2019] for relevant discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is questioned by Chappell [2019: 254]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Based on Ralston [2005]. See also Cohen [2000: 173] who discusses similarly gruesome cases involving cutting off one’s leg. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Such cases are not especially rare. Others include: being open about an embarrassing medical condition; opting for deeply unpleasant or painful treatment like chemotherapy; giving a daunting talk as part of a job application process; doing volunteer work, though one is an extremely shy person, that may prove character-building. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Note the claim here is that *typically* there are such differences between short-term costs and long-term costs. It is the difficulty of imposition that’s the fundamental issue in any case when it comes to costs. It’s worth noting too that, in some cases, the overall degree of cost of a further-off harm may be exacerbated by unpleasant interim feelings of anticipation, so it’s prudentially better overall to get the harmful event over and done with sooner. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Note that by using the language of ‘imposition’, I am not suggesting that failure to help the poor is an instance of doing harm, rather than merely allowing harm. More strictly we are talking about allowing harm to befall, rather than imposing. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I have argued that demandingness is constituted by two factors, cost and psychological difficulty. My focus has been on establishing that psychological difficulty doesn’t reduce to cost. But might our discussion suggest that cost actually reduces to psychological difficulty, and that all demandingness considerations ultimately boil down to psychological difficulty? This position has significant appeal. (See Chappell [2019] for sympathetic discussion.)

    Nonetheless, I am doubtful about the view. First, we should note the weight of the prima facie case for the relevance of welfare costs, summarised above in Section 2. A major part of what makes Singer’s account of beneficence demanding is that complying means a significant hit to my well-being.

    Unsurprisingly, it is tricky to identify realistic cases that might adjudicate decisively between the cost-plus-difficulty view and the difficulty-only view. This is because the difficulty of imposing significant costs on one’s own well-being is such a deeply entrenched part of typical human psychology. We may try to imagine an agent given a pill that renders it temporarily easy for him to impose great costs upon himself, perhaps by infusing him for a time with an outlook of wholly impartial benevolence. Would it be demanding on him to bear great welfare costs for the sake of averting even larger costs to strangers (e.g. giving up all his life savings for the sake of aiding the distant poor)? In *some* sense of ‘demanding’, the answer is surely yes. Although the action that results in him bearing long-term burdens is easy to perform at the time, the hardships he will undergo as a consequence seem sufficient for classifying the course of action as demanding. Complying with a demand to donate his life savings would be demanding on him *at least* in that sense in which we might speak of lower levels of beneficence from the affluent being ‘demanding’ on potential recipients of assistance who will go unaided. See Sobel [2007].

    More difficult to answer are the moral questions: Would he be blameworthy for declining to give up his savings, when prompted to do so while in this drug-induced spirit of impartial benevolence? Does the mere fact that he is made less well-off count against his being morally required to donate his life savings? These are difficult questions to answer, given the elusiveness of the psychology in question. The answers we are inclined to give may change according to how we fill out the details of the case. In the case of blame, it seems especially tricky to work out what is appropriately felt towards the drug-influenced agent who nevertheless fails to make the sacrifice. The question about moral obligation is arguably simpler to answer. Moral obligations are plausibly determined in part by whether a *typical* agent would merit blame for failing to do so. If so, this unusual agent may be subject to the same obligations as others – obligations which are plausibly diminished because of what’s psychologically difficulty for *typical* agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It is important point to note that the degree of difficulty can vary significantly from person to person, even holding degree of cost constant. Someone may find it very easy to impose a certain cost upon herself, while someone else finds it very difficult. And often it may be a mark of good character that one finds it easy to impose costs upon oneself, for the sake of a good end (for the good of others and/or for the sake of one’s own longer term good). And one is sometimes morally responsible for one’s character. One may find it very difficult to impose relatively minor costs upon oneself because of a long history of self-indulgence, repeated instances of taking the easy option, giving preference to oneself (or to one’s short-term gain). Because of this, we might not want to say that degree of difficulty *unconditionally* varies with blameworthiness. Rather the degree of blameworthiness mitigation generated by difficulty is tempered by the extent to which one is responsible for how difficult one finds it to act well. See Dougherty [2015] and Chappell [2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See [www.effectivealtruism.org](http://www.effectivealtruism.org). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Also relevant are misperceptions of the welfare costs to the agent of giving. People typically imagine that in giving substantial donations, their own lives will be made worse. But for many of the affluent, there is good reason to believe that this is wildly exaggerated. See Gabriel [2016: 6]; Lichtenberg [2014: Ch. 6]. Once one reaches a certain threshold of wealth and income, greater wealth typically does little or nothing to increase one’s well-being. Our main sources of happiness once our needs are met are experiences, and flourishing relationships, rather than material goods. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. It may be argued, of course, that this is to some degree appropriate, given the moral distinction between doing and allowing harm. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a more detailed summary of these issues, and relevant references, see Gabriel [2016: Sect. 3]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For very helpful discussion of these issues, I’m grateful to Marcel van Ackeren, Lukas Naegeli, Joe Slater, and Martin Sticker, as well as Alex Gregory, Conor McHugh, Jonathan Way, Daniel Whiting, Fiona Woollard, and other Southampton colleagues who provided valuable feedback at a departmental Research Day. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)