

WHEN ENOUGH IS NOT ENOUGH SATISFICING AND MORAL EFFICIENCY

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ONE WAY of distinguishing different moral theories is by their real-world demandingness. A theory is demanding (in the real world) to the degree that, as things actually are, adherence to it imposes burdens on us (taking into account both the prevalence and significance of burdens).¹ While burdens are usually understood as *welfare costs*, they may also be conceptualized as the *volitional effort* or *psychological difficulty* required in following the theory.² Although there is a substantive difference between these interpretations, I stay neutral between them in what is to come. Following a more demanding theory in the real world often makes one less well-off or requires more effort than following a less demanding one. According to an influential line of thought, this difference between theories is of great significance. Many people believe that there is a principled limit to the demandingness of morality. Usually, this is expressed by claiming that there is some absolute threshold of demandingness that morality does not exceed: while morality can and often is demanding, it cannot be overdemanding. This provides an argument against theories that cross this line: they fail to respect a central tenet of commonsense morality (so it is alleged). Attending to real-world demandingness allows us to demarcate a class of moral theories—namely, that of overdemanding moral theories—and reject them.

On the receiving end of this argument is, paradigmatically, classical utilitarianism.

- 1 Kyle York argues that the focus on real-world demandingness, as opposed to demandingness across the whole modal space, is misplaced, and he uses this to argue against cost-based rather than reasons-based interpretations of demandingness. Although I focus on real-world demandingness, I reach results very similar to York's. York's arguments, then, provide an additional reason to eschew absolute thresholds of burdensomeness. See section 3 below ("Moral Demandingness and Modal Demandingness").
- 2 Two further interpretations, which I only tangentially address, understand burdens as *cognitive requirements* needed to successfully apply the theory or as *restrictions of moral freedom* when following the theory—i.e., as the degree to which we can choose between permissible options.

Classical Utilitarianism: An action is permissible if and only if its outcome is as good as possible (i.e., there is no available alternative action with a better outcome).

This view, it is often claimed, is almost at the top of the demandingness spectrum. As long as we believe that there is some relevant demandingness threshold, it should thus be abandoned. Given that this is one of the most prominent objections to classical utilitarianism, it is no surprise that utilitarians have tried a variety of responses. One of these is tactical retreat. Some utilitarians, conceding both that excessive demandingness is a problem and that utilitarianism does impose excessive demands, have opted to modify utilitarianism in a way that scales back the burdens it imposes. Instead of focusing on maximizing the good or always doing the best, as classical utilitarianism does, utilitarianism should be content with *satisficing*—that is, doing enough. Call this the *satisficing strategy*. Using this concessive maneuver, one could keep most of the general theory intact while escaping the objection from overdemandingness. This at least is the idea. In what follows, I investigate whether it can also become a reality.

It should be noted that while I focus on utilitarianism, the charge of being overly demanding and the corresponding pressure to limit the obligations imposed by one's moral theory are not restricted to utilitarianism.³ For one, every theory that entails burden-insensitive positive obligations to benefit individuals or promote the good faces similar issues, from pluralist views that recognize a *pro tanto* obligation of beneficence to several versions of contractualism.⁴ For another, even without positive obligations, a theory can be overly demanding by asking us to respect negative obligations. If I were lost in the mountains, and my only way of alerting the rescue service were to burn some of your belongings that I happen to be carrying, it would intuitively be overly demanding to require that I respect your right to not have your property damaged. As such, most of the arguments to follow can be, *mutatis mutandis*, applied to nonutilitarian theories as well.⁵

Before I go on, a caveat is in order. Although I speak of “the” objection from overdemandingness in this article, one can distinguish several substantively different complaints running under this rubric. I understand the objection from overdemandingness as targeted specifically at *moral* permissibility as

3 I thank an anonymous referee for inviting me to expand on this point.

4 Cf., for instance, Ashford, “The Demandingness of Scanlon’s Contractualism.”

5 I here assume that even on theories that do not allow for positive duties, there is a way to measure how much is morally at stake in a situation such that there can be a mismatch between the moral gain achieved by following the theory and the burdens imposed in doing so.

opposed to what we have most reason to do *overall*, or *all things considered*. To be clear, the arguments that follow do not hinge on this or on the specific way I understand the difference between moral and overall permissibility. They work even if one takes demandingness to be concerned with overall permissibility or prefers another account of how moral and overall permissibility relate.⁶ I prefer this reading of the objection from overdemandingness because it preserves this objection as an independent complaint against utilitarianism that does not rely on a prior rejection of utilitarian, agent-neutral axiology (as the charge that utilitarianism does not allow for partiality to oneself, for instance, would).⁷

My own preferred view of the difference between moral and overall permissibility is *hypological*. Sometimes, if people act overall impermissibly without proper excuse, this makes it appropriate or fitting to have certain reactive attitudes towards them. These reactive attitudes (and their expression) constitute what we call moral blame. This moral blame, as usually understood, has characteristics that set it apart from other forms of criticism or reaction we can have in response to impermissible conduct, like thinking the other to be imprudent. The characteristic feature of moral as opposed to overall permissibility lies in exactly this connection with moral blameworthiness. This naturally leads to a specific interpretation of the objection from overdemandingness and, correspondingly, the satisficing strategy: they are concerned with the appropriateness of moral blame and praise.⁸ The satisficing strategy attempts to formulate conditions of when overall impermissible behavior is, in addition, also morally wrong—i.e., when blame is appropriate—thereby capturing more of common-sense moral thought than classical utilitarianism.⁹ This makes it possible to combine a satisficing version of utilitarianism on the moral level with a classically maximizing account of what we have most reason to do overall, which is why this understanding is particularly attractive for utilitarians.¹⁰

In this article, I evaluate extant versions of this satisficing strategy and propose a new version of it. After briefly dismissing in section 1 Michael Slote's *Satisficing Utilitarianism*, which is the best-known and most implausible version

6 For a focus on overall permissibility, cf. Case, "Rethinking Demandingness."

7 See also the discussion of Scheffler's view in section 4 below. I thank an anonymous referee for urging me to make this clearer.

8 This general idea is also pursued by McElwee, "Demandingness Objections in Ethics," 97–103; and Chappell, "Willpower Satisficing," 256–58.

9 An account of appropriate blame should not be confused with an account of permissible blame. That a person is morally blameworthy for some conduct does not imply that blaming this person is permissible. Indeed, utilitarians hold that it does not even give us any reason to do so.

10 Cf. Chappell, who argues for just this combination ("Willpower Satisficing").

of this strategy, I turn in section 2 to the more recent and much more promising interpretation of the satisficing strategy proposed by Richard Yetter Chappell. While Chappell's view is a big step forward, it does not solve all relevant problems because it misconstrues the objection from overdemandingness. In section 3, I argue *contra* Chappell that the objection from overdemandingness should not be read as claiming that there is some absolute limit to the burdens that morality imposes, for there is no such limit. Recognizing this, I propose in section 4 a new version of the satisficing strategy, *ratio satisficing utilitarianism*, that does without such an absolute limit and avoids the problems for Chappell's view. I then go on to develop and defend this view against some objections in sections 5 and 6.

1. STANDARD SATISFICING

Slote's well-known version of the satisficing strategy is based on the introduction of a *utility threshold*. Once the outcome of an action passes this threshold, the action is automatically classified as permissible. Let us say that the outcome of an action that passes this threshold is *good enough*. Slote's view thus has the following general structure.

Utility Satisficing Utilitarianism: An action is permissible if and only if its outcome is as good as possible *or* its outcome is good enough.¹¹

In order to evaluate what this view implies, we need to say more about what 'good enough' amounts to. It is clear that to escape the charge of overdemandingness, the standard of good enough should lie noticeably below that of being the best. Proponents of utility satisficing utilitarianism trace the susceptibility of classical utilitarianism to overdemandingness worries back to its maximization requirement. Maximization, they claim, is often excessively burdensome: doing the best is far too hard. In retreating to the lower bar of doing enough good, several views about what is good enough are possible, most notably an absolute interpretation, according to which an outcome is good enough if it contains a specified absolute amount of utility (either on the whole or for each individual), and a relative interpretation, according to which an outcome is good enough if it is sufficiently close to the best outcome available. While each specification of this threshold introduces specific problems of calibrating between being overly and insufficiently demanding, utility satisficing

11 Cf. Slote, "Satisficing Consequentialism" and *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism*. The first clause is needed to handle cases in which no outcome is good enough. Whether such cases are possible depends on how we spell out the notion of a good enough outcome.

utilitarianism fails because of a more fundamental difficulty that is independent of how we understand 'good enough'.¹²

This difficulty is that utility satisficing utilitarianism is structurally inadequate to answer the objection from overdemandingness. Utility satisficing utilitarianism attempts to scale back the burdens imposed by utilitarianism by restricting the good that has to be brought about. But the goodness of an outcome is not always proportional to how burdensome it is to bring this outcome about. Because of this *problem of incongruity*, utility satisficing utilitarianism grossly misclassifies the status of many actions. Utility satisficing utilitarianism leads to over- or underdemandingness independently of where the utility threshold is set. If it is low, then it is often permissible not to perform barely burdensome actions with amazing outcomes. If it is high, then it is often impermissible to refrain from highly burdensome actions with outcomes that are barely better than those of much less burdensome alternatives.

This misclassification is tied to the fact that utility satisficing utilitarianism allows egregious *moral inefficiency*. Since all actions with outcomes above the utility threshold are permissible, it is possible to choose some such action even though there is a better, less burdensome alternative. But such gratuitous prevention or foregoing of utility is reprehensible. We would therefore expect that utilitarian theories are committed to the following:

Gratuitous Goodness: An action is impermissible if there is an equally or less burdensome alternative with a better outcome.

I argue later that gratuitous goodness is in fact ambiguous and only plausible as long as we understand "equally or less burdensome" in a particular, narrow way. What is true, in any case, is that egregious inefficiency must be off the table. Noticing these problems, it should be clear that utility satisficing utilitarianism is entirely unable to provide an answer to the objection from overdemandingness. As a response to the objection from overdemandingness, it is without theoretical promise.¹³

12 I discuss the problems arising from different specifications of the relevant threshold in more detail in Weber, "Schwellenwertutilitarismus."

13 There are two other projects for which utility satisficing utilitarianism might nevertheless be useful. First, utility satisficing utilitarianism could have some virtues as an indirect decision procedure intended to reduce cognitive demands on deliberating agents (though I doubt utility satisficing utilitarianism would be the best candidate for this). Second, utility satisficing utilitarianism or something like it might be appealed to as an account of a specific moral subdomain like justice. Utility satisficing utilitarianism might, for instance, spell out what each individual has a basic moral claim to. Both of these interpretations of utility satisficing utilitarianism are quite different from the one I give in the text and play no role in this article.

2. SOPHISTICATED SATISFICING

The failure of utility satisficing utilitarianism should not sour us on the satisficing strategy in its entirety. Richard Yetter Chappell proposes another version that holds far more promise. Chappell argues that we should introduce a threshold not of utility but of burdensomeness. The problem with classical utilitarianism is not that it is maximizing but that it maximizes *without constraints*. His view, which works as follows, is intended to remedy this.

Burden Satisficing Utilitarianism: An action is permissible iff every alternative with a better outcome is *both* (1) excessively burdensome *and* (2) more burdensome.¹⁴

According to Chappell, each action has some level of absolute burdensomeness that can be specified. And there is some threshold along this scale such that actions above it are *excessively burdensome*. This leads Chappell to understand the objection from overdemandingness, as directed toward classical utilitarianism, as follows: it complains that classical utilitarianism sometimes classifies only excessively burdensome actions as permissible. I argue later that this understanding is mistaken. But first, we should see how Chappell answers it. Chappell's view makes use of two components. First, Chappell proposes a *burden threshold* instead of Slote's utility threshold (this is borne out by condition 1): it is impossible for an overdemanding action to be the sole permissible option (thus being obligatory) since there is always a permissible option below the burden threshold. In essence, 1 gives us a sufficient condition for any action to count as morally permissible—namely, having (one of) the best outcome(s) of all actions whose burdensomeness falls below the threshold. Burden satisficing utilitarianism thus ensures that there will always be at least one permissible action that does not impose high absolute burdens (if there is some such action).

A second difference to Slote is that Chappell does not rest content with just the threshold. It is not true, Chappell argues, that every action above the threshold with a better outcome than the best below the threshold is permissible. Instead, there is an additional, necessary condition for permissibility: there must be no better alternative that is not also more burdensome (as condition 2 states). This condition ensures that, for all actions that share the same level of burdensomeness, only those with the best outcomes are permissible.¹⁵ This

14 Cf. Chappell, "Willpower Satisficing," 252. I adjust Chappell's formulation to make it easier to read.

15 More precisely, an action at a certain level of burdensomeness is permissible only if there is no alternative with a better outcome that is equally or less burdensome.

leads to the existence of *supererogation holes*: cases where actions that are better than the minimum are nevertheless impermissible.¹⁶ The cases of egregious moral inefficiency provide prime examples of this.

Chappell's view is superior to Slote's in every respect. First, Chappell's first condition directly ties the permissibility of an action to the level of burdensomeness of that action. This avoids the problem of incongruity. Second, Chappell avoids the abhorrent implications of Slote's view by directly incorporating gratuitous goodness—which is identical to Chappell's second condition. Chappell's view is a major improvement over utility satisficing utilitarianism.

Not so fast. Although burden satisficing utilitarianism is a major step forward, it is not beyond reproach. In two recent publications, Joe Slater raises two problems for Chappell's view.¹⁷ Slater's first objection consists in a dilemma faced by gratuitous goodness. The gratuitous goodness principle, Slater complains, allows for two different readings depending on how we understand 'equally burdensome'—namely, either narrowly or broadly, each of which has problematic consequences. If we adopt the narrow understanding, then the scope of the gratuitous goodness principle is overly restricted, and it fails to apply in all cases in which we would expect it to apply. If we adopt the broad understanding, however, then the gratuitous goodness principle is too strict and applies in too many instances. There is, then, no way to correctly calibrate the principle.

Let us look at this objection in a little more detail.¹⁸ Imagine that, moral exemplar that you are, you decide to donate all your savings to an effective charity. Your donation is so substantial, we can suppose, that it goes far beyond the relevant burden threshold such that it is not obligatory for you to donate this sum. There are two different charities under consideration. One charity will use the money to combat world hunger, while the other will fund important medical research on some illness. Let us assume that, as you know, both charities will do quite similar amounts of good, though the second charity will achieve a little less. Your mother, whom you admired, was a medical researcher driven by her dream to eradicate the very same illness; you identify with the vision and approach of this charity and would prefer donating to the second charity because of this. How ought you spend the money?

The answer of burden satisficing utilitarianism depends on whether the gratuitous goodness principle applies (since donating to either charity would be

16 For this expression, see Wessels, "Beyond the Call of Duty," 90. For a treatment of this feature of supererogation, see also Horton, "The All or Nothing Problem."

17 Slater, "Satisficing Consequentialism Still Doesn't Satisfy" and "Satisficers *Still* Get Away with Murder!"

18 See Slater, "Satisficing Consequentialism Still Doesn't Satisfy," 114–16.

overly burdensome), i.e., on whether both donations are *equally* burdensome. Given how the case is stipulated, this is not entirely clear: while both donations are equally substantial, you have a preference for one of them, after all. According to a first possible interpretation, such minor differences (e.g., slight preferences, different emotional connections, or insubstantial additional exertions of will-power) do not influence an action's relevant level of burdensomeness. On this *broad understanding* of burdensomeness, levels of burdensomeness are individuated in a rather coarse-grained way, and the requirements for gratuitous goodness to apply are low. So too in the case at hand: given that there is at most a slight difference in the things relevant for burdensomeness, it would be impermissible to follow your preference and donate to the second charity closer to your heart.

This is not, however, the answer that strikes many as correct. For many, it seems clear that it should be permissible to choose the second charity, in line with your preferences. Slater, for instance, comments, "Many of us would recoil at the prospect of condemning anyone who gives a substantial amount of their income to a non-perfectly-efficient charity—perhaps even the second best charity. . . . If someone did give . . . to the second best charity, it would seem extremely inappropriate to condemn them for doing so."¹⁹ The broad understanding of gratuitous goodness is thus much too strict: it robs us of some moral leeway in going beyond the call of duty that, intuitively, we seem to have.

This suggests that we should give up the broad understanding and adopt a *narrow understanding*, according to which levels of burdensomeness are individuated in a fine-grained way, and the requirements for gratuitous goodness to apply are high. This would lead to the correct result in the case at hand: both donations would be permissible. But it would lead to even more implausible verdicts in other cases. It would, for instance, be permissible to save two rather than three people from a burning building if saving anyone is above the burden threshold, and we do not particularly like the third guy. Given our slight preference for not bothering with him, saving two and saving three would not be equally burdensome, and we would, in saving the two, maximize utility on that level of burdensomeness. This obviously cannot be right. But then, the gratuitous goodness principle is either false or too weak to do the work it is intended to do, which leads to a dilemma for burden satisficing utilitarianism.

We can now turn to Slater's second objection (which is already anticipated though not adequately addressed by Chappell).²⁰ It concerns the burden threshold. For burden satisficing utilitarianism struggles with cases that have the

19 Slater, "Satisficing Consequentialism Still Doesn't Satisfy," 114.

20 Cf. Chappell, "Willpower Satisficing," 255; and Slater, "Satisficers *Still* Get Away with Murder!" 1365–68.

following structure: there is an action that is (a) very slightly above the burden threshold and (b) generates significantly more utility than any action below the burden threshold. Consider, for instance, the following macabre variation of a trolley case. An out-of-control trolley is rushing towards a group of innocents. There are two bridges above the track, with a heavy man on one and a large sandbag on the other, both of which would stop the trolley if pushed onto the track. You have unfortunately been ensnared in a bear trap. You could free yourself and rush onto the bridge, but this would cost you one of your legs and would make all movement considerably painful. The bridge with the man is closer to you than the one with the sandbag on it, though you could reach both in time. You now have three options: (1) stay put and let the innocents die; (2) sacrifice your leg, endure the pain of hobbling toward the closer bridge, and push the man, saving the innocents; or (3) sacrifice your leg, endure the pain of hobbling toward the more distant bridge, and push the sandbag, saving the innocents. If the distance between the bridges is just large enough to make option 2 and option 3 unequally burdensome, then burden satisficing utilitarianism would classify all three options as permissible. But given the comparatively small difference in burdensomeness and the comparatively large difference in utility between 2 and 3, this seems counterintuitive: 2 should be impermissible!²¹ You would, it seems, be open to substantial moral reproach should you sacrifice your leg but be unwilling to endure a few extra moments of pain to avoid sacrificing a life.

To these two flexibility-based objections, we can add another. Burden satisficing utilitarianism also has the implication that significant additional burdens have to be borne in order to secure tiny improvements in utility if we are below the burden threshold.²² Imagine that you face the choice between

21 Chappell is aware of this and writes that the level of maximum burdensomeness “plausibly ought to be context-sensitive, e.g. to ensure (1) that it’s never permissible to do just a little good when a huge amount of good could be achieved by an only *slightly* more [burdensome] action” (“Willpower Satisficing,” 255). However, Chappell fails to provide an account of how exactly this should be done. (In fact, the way he spells out his account seems to preclude this context sensitivity.) It seems that by sticking to the threshold conception, Chappell’s options in addressing this problem are very similar to the options of a proponent of utility satisficing utilitarianism in addressing the problems with that theory’s threshold. Furthermore, adopting strong moral efficiency is incompatible with the existence of absolute limits of impossible burdens (cf. Wessels, “Beyond the Call of Duty,” 93–95), something that Chappell apparently wishes to uphold.

22 Douglas Portmore raises a similar complaint against *classical utilitarianism*—namely, that it implies “agents should sacrifice, not only their disposable income but even their own lives and the lives of those whom they love most whenever doing so will produce the most aggregate utility, and thus, even when the net gain would be as small as one *utile*” (where a “*utile*” is the smallest possible unit of utility) (*Commonsense Consequentialism*, 4). Note that Portmore’s main grievance lies not in the fact that utilitarianism can impose such

two alternatives: the first would not impose any burdens on you and secure a great amount of goodness; the second would, however, be noticeably burdensome—namely, such that it would be just shy of being excessively burdensome in Chappell's framework. Still, the second would secure just a tiny bit more utility (the burdens imposed on you already accounted for). Burden satisficing utilitarianism and classical utilitarianism would imply that because of this, it would be impermissible to choose the first action. But that seems implausible: for the first action is only very slightly worse but far less burdensome.

In all three cases, burden satisficing utilitarianism appears to be insufficiently flexible to allow for a proper picture of moral permissibility. What should we make of this?

3. AGAINST THE BURDEN THRESHOLD

The three objections just considered raise valid complaints: burden satisficing utilitarianism really is insufficiently flexible. However, just leaving it at that, though perhaps adding some epicycles, fails to target the core of the matter. I believe that the source of these problems concerns the very heart of Chappell's view: the absolute burden threshold. Chappell, in line with many others, seems to adopt an absolute interpretation of the objection from demandingness: on this understanding, actions below some level of burdensomeness are never problematic with respect to demandingness while actions above some level of burdensomeness are always problematic with respect to demandingness. Both claims are, I think, mistaken: there are no absolute limits of morally acceptable burdensomeness. Like Slote's utility threshold, Chappell's burden threshold needs to be abandoned. After making the case for this claim, I go on to look at its implications for the satisficing strategy and propose a better version of it: instead of restricting the demands for either utility or burdens, we need to look at the proper balancing of both.

Adopting an absolute burden threshold involves subscribing to two claims. On the one hand, one accepts that below this threshold, there is no demandingness-related objection to moral obligatoriness. If burdens are low, then we really ought to do the best. On the other hand, one accepts that there is an absolute limit to morality's demands. Actions that, in absolute terms, reach a sufficient level of burdensomeness can never be obligatory. Both claims are, I believe, mistaken.

burdens but in the fact that it imposes them to secure only trivial improvements: "I find it incredible to suppose that such miniscule gains in aggregate utility could be sufficient to make it reasonable to perform such acts" (4).

On the one hand, it is sometimes permissible not to perform very undemanding actions with (slightly) better outcomes than available undemanding alternatives. Consider the following.

Flowers: Due to a billing error, I happen to have an extra bouquet of flowers in my possession, which I have no real use for. I could bring them over to my elderly neighbor, to whom they would bring some (though not great) enjoyment. However, since the weather is bad, and my chair is comfortable, doing so would be slightly burdensome for me.

Given that gifting the bouquet is surely not excessively burdensome and better than the alternative, Chappell's view implies that it would be impermissible not to do so. However, it seems to me that this can be criticized on grounds that are very similar to the worries voiced by the demandingness objection. My failure is much too trivial and insignificant to merit moral reproach, and subjecting it to a stringent moral demand would be excessive. It does seem overly demanding to require us to endure some burdens for, in comparison, quite trivial improvements. Such a demand is excessive not because of the absolute size of the burden it imposes but because of the insignificance of the good it secures. This is especially true if we understand the objective of the satisficing strategy as supplying part of a condition of moral blameworthiness (as Chappell also does). It does not seem appropriate to react with moral blame toward my decision not to gift the flowers, and this cannot plausibly be explained by some excusing or exculpating condition. Thus, Chappell's view is still too demanding in this way: it requires actions that make only trivial improvements.²³

One might be tempted to reply that instead of not being blameworthy at all, I am blameworthy only to a minuscule degree. It is often claimed to be difficult to distinguish between cases where a normatively relevant factor is not present at all and cases where it is present to a very small degree. I have two things to say. First, I do not believe that it really is difficult to distinguish between no presence and minor presence when it comes to moral blameworthiness. One of the characteristic features of moral blame is its seriousness. Moral blame stands out among all reactive attitudes as particularly weighty: we cannot (and usually do not) "shrug off" appropriate moral blame in the same way we can (and often do) shrug off a charge of impoliteness or bad taste. Blame "carries a

23 Note that this concerns also actions where the stakes are not trivial for everyone. If I could perform some burdensome though not excessively burdensome action that would cause someone else a little more good than I would myself sacrifice, it would be implausible to claim that I am morally obligated to perform it (if we take demandingness considerations seriously).

characteristic depth, force, or sting.”²⁴ Because of this, we are generally speaking very receptive as to when we are fitting targets of it. If so, cases in which appropriate moral blame is barely recognizable become dubious: once we enter into the realm of moral blame, we should and usually do take it seriously. This does not mean of course that there is no distinction between strong and weak moral blame (or blameworthiness), only that even being morally blameworthy to a minor degree is still quite noticeable.²⁵ Second, even if we allow for the possibility of moral blame sometimes being hard to spot, it seems to me that the not-blameworthy-at-all side has an intuitive advantage. It would not seem appropriate for me to feel bad at all for not bringing over the flowers; it could clearly not be reasonably demanded of me; and my neighbor would be making a mistake were they to resent me for it. We should acknowledge that demands can be objectionable not because of the seriousness of the imposed burden but because of the insignificance of the achieved moral good.

That such actions are not usually taken to fall into the sphere of obligation is also evidenced by the fact that, for instance, gestures of kindness, small favors, or making an effort at being extra friendly are classified as *supererogatory* by commonsense morality. Ordinary moral life is, with regard to such actions, characterized by a form of moral freedom: we are free to perform such actions but will not generally be blameworthy if we do not put in the extra effort. Quite the contrary, our performance of such actions ordinarily merits moral praise. If I were to gift the bouquet to my neighbor, it would be fitting for the neighbor to feel gratitude in a way that need not be fitting if I were simply discharging a clear moral requirement. If one aims at avoiding the demandingness objection in general, one should also aim at avoiding a requirement to secure goods that are, in comparison to the burdens incurred, trivial. Doing so requires, however, the rejection of a burden threshold below which the burdens imposed by actions cease to be of moral interest. Chappell’s view, being built around such a threshold, cannot be fully adequate.

On the other hand, it is sometimes impermissible not to perform very demanding actions.²⁶ Consider the following.

Train: Through no fault of my own, I happen to be fixed onto some train tracks. An express train, fully occupied by many innocents, is speeding

24 Hieronymi, “The Force and Fairness of Blame,” 117.

25 I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

26 Note that this is already implied by the strong version of moral efficiency I advocate: there could be a sequence of ever more burdensome but still efficient actions, where, given that we ought to perform one action, we also ought to perform its “successor,” independently of how absolutely burdensome this successor is.

towards me, threatening to crush me to death. The only way to avoid being crushed is to engage a mechanism that would blow up the whole train, killing most and maiming some of the passengers. Though overcome by immense fear and trepidation, it is, with considerable effort, possible for me not to engage the mechanism.

Surely, not engaging the mechanism is excessively burdensome in absolute terms. Chappell's view would classify this action as permissible but not obligatory. Nevertheless, it is plausible that I am morally obligated not to engage the mechanism, and this appears to be the verdict that commonsense morality gives as well. The same can be said about other cases in which our refusal to shoulder a certain burden leads to a moral catastrophe: most moral theories plausibly imply that it is impermissible to let such a catastrophe come to pass. Moreover, it seems to me that commonsense morality requires undertaking similar burdens even if the stakes are substantially lower. If some stranger and I happen to be in need of some lifesaving drug, and this drug is in the stranger's possession, commonsense morality pronounces it impermissible to kill this stranger, even if this is the only way to save my life. In general, then, even according to commonsense morality, there does not appear to be any absolute limit to morality's demands.²⁷ Since Chappell builds a burden ceiling into his theory, it classifies too many actions as overdemanding. Chappell's reading of the objection from overdemandingness is much too rigid, and his resulting view imposes too little burdens as a result. Again, burden satisficing utilitarianism does not appear to be the best version of the satisficing strategy available.

Of course, critics might jump in at this point. There is, they might claim, an absolute burden ceiling because we have a fundamental egoistic prerogative to secure a sufficiently decent life for us that enjoys lexical priority over other normative considerations. It would then always be permissible to prioritize our interests over those of others given that our interests are sufficiently affected. But such a prerogative is not something that, as the original objection from overdemandingness, can be the premise of a convincing argument against allegedly overly demanding theories: it lacks robust grounding in common sense and is itself a seriously controversial claim in need of justification. If our aim is to move classical utilitarianism—or any other theory thought to be overly demanding—closer to commonsense morality by scaling back the burdens it imposes, we need not address views that depart from commonsense morality in imposing even stricter limits. And if we wish to formulate a

27 Additional support for this can be found in York's modal conception of demandingness in "Moral Demandingness and Modal Demandingness."

convincing objection to classical utilitarianism, then we should not appeal to principles that themselves have feet of clay.

4. EFFICIENT SATISFICING

We can develop a better version of the satisficing strategy and a better interpretation of the demandingness objection by heeding the lessons we have learned from discussing utility satisficing utilitarianism and burden satisficing utilitarianism. What we need is a view that is thoroughly committed to moral efficiency without positing arbitrary absolute limits of burdensomeness. An action is morally efficient in the sense I am interested in if and only if in performing the action, we get a sufficient amount of additional goodness for a comparatively smaller increase in burdensomeness. What this means is that we should see to it that the burdens imposed by some action and the goodness achieved by it stand in the right relation. This leads us directly to the following proposal.

Ratio Satisficing Utilitarianism: An action is permissible if and only if there is (1) no alternative that is equally or less burdensome but has a better outcome *and* (2) no more burdensome alternative with a better outcome that has a sufficient burden-utility ratio relative to it.²⁸

The *burden-utility ratio* of an action relative to another more burdensome action with a better outcome tells us how much additional good we get in relation to the additional burdens we undertake:

- 28 Slater considers and rejects a modification of Chappell's view that shares some similarity with ratio satisficing utilitarianism:

Restricted Effort-Satisficing (RES): An act ϕ is permissible iff:

1. ϕ brings about at least as much good as could be achieved by expending X effort.

AND

2. If the agent expends more than X effort, there must not be an option ψ requiring a similar amount of effort that brings about significantly more good than ϕ ...

Another option for interpreting 'significantly more' would be as a function of the marginal utility (or marginal improvement to the consequences, for non-utilitarian consequentialists) *and* the marginal effort. We might, for instance, divide the marginal utility of an alternative action (in hedons) by the marginal effort costs (in effort points), and if the result is sufficiently high, we could regard this action as doing *significantly* more good. ("Satisficers *Still* Get Away with Murder!" 1370–72)

However, this view still incorporates an absolute burden threshold.

$$\text{BUR}(a, b) = \frac{\text{goodness}(a) - \text{goodness}(b)}{\text{burdens}(a) - \text{burdens}(b)},$$

with the numerator denoting the difference in goodness between the (outcomes of the) actions and the denominator denoting the difference in absolute levels of burdensomeness between the actions.²⁹ An alternative has a sufficient burden-utility ratio relative to the action under consideration iff $\text{BUR}(a, b)$ passes a certain threshold. Like utility satisficing utilitarianism and burden satisficing utilitarianism, then, ratio satisficing utilitarianism makes use of a threshold. Unlike utility satisficing utilitarianism and burden satisficing utilitarianism, however, this is a threshold not of utility or burdensomeness alone but of their relation. The fraction giving us this relation is defined only if the actions under consideration differ with respect to their burdensomeness, and we can restrict it to cases where this is so. In all other cases—i.e., in the comparison of equally burdensome actions—condition 1 kicks in.³⁰ Ratio satisficing utilitarianism is thus well defined for all cases.

Ratio satisficing utilitarianism is similar to some views found in the literature. It is structurally identical to Samuel Scheffler's *hybrid theory*, which combines a concern for the impartial good with granting self-standing importance to the agent's personal point of view. In spelling out such a theory, Scheffler makes the following proposal:

I believe that a plausible agent-centred prerogative would allow each agent to assign a certain proportionately greater weight to his own interests than to the interests of other people. It would then allow the agent to promote the non-optimal outcome of his choosing, provided only that the degree of its inferiority to each of the superior outcomes he could instead promote in no case exceeded, by more than the specified proportion, the degree of sacrifice necessary for him to promote the superior outcome. If all of the non-optimal outcomes available to the

29 Since classical utilitarianism and its cognates typically assume that goodness is an extensive quantity measurable on a ratio scale, for convenience's sake, I also work under this assumption. For my purposes here, however, it suffices to have interval scale measurability.

30 Condition 1 is identical to the narrow understanding of Gratuitous Goodness. As I argue, this principle poses problems for burden satisficing utilitarianism—namely, that it is far too permissive once we are above the burden threshold. But the same problem does not arise here. This is because cases where burdens are not exactly equal are covered by condition 2. Of course, some might still think that choices where 2 does not apply should be classified as equally permissible because they are morally trivial. While I do not agree with this, those sympathetic to this claim can replace 1 with a corresponding condition. Note that some condition is needed to cover cases where 2 is not defined.

agent were ruled out on these grounds, then and only then would he be required to promote the best overall outcome.³¹

Like with ratio satisficing utilitarianism, Scheffler proposes to attend to the relation between the burdensomeness of an action and the utility it generates (with burdens interpreted in terms of welfare costs): we are required to take on additional burdens only if this secures a significantly greater gain in additional goodness. We want “goodness bang” for our “burdens buck.” In substance and especially in its justification, however, there are noticeable differences. Scheffler develops his view from the guiding idea that the personal point of view is normatively independent from the utilitarian’s “point of view of the universe” and has self-standing normative importance: an agent is allowed to weigh their own interests more than the interests of others. Because of this, Scheffler’s proposal has general implications for the objection from overdemandingness and the satisficing strategy. If Scheffler were right, then the failure the objection from overdemandingness attributes to classical utilitarianism would be a mistaken underlying axiology or view about what we have most reason to do.

Understanding the objection from overdemandingness in this way raises three related problems (some of which have previously come up already). First, it undermines the status of this objection as a self-standing complaint that is independent of quarrels about moral and nonmoral reasons (for actions) or axiology.³² Instead, it relies on a prior rejection of utilitarian axiology—which would of course need to be substantiated by some independent argument to not be simply question begging.³³ Second, because of this, taking a concessive approach with regard to this interpretation of the objection from overdemandingness is quite unappealing for utilitarians. I said at the outset that the objection from overdemandingness, as I want to understand it here, concerns specifically moral permissibility, leaving room for a classic utilitarian answer to the question of what we have most reason to do. But once we acknowledge that the objection targets the underlying utilitarian axiology, this view becomes untenable. If we were to bury the utilitarian commitment to a thoroughly agent-neutral axiology to account for certain moral phenomena, we could not comfortably resurrect it to account for what we have most reason

31 Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, 20.

32 A similar point is also made by Chappell, “Willpower Satisficing,” 254.

33 For this line of criticism of the objection from overdemandingness, see again Sobel, “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection.” One possible reply is that the intuition pumped by cases characterized as overdemanding just is part of an argument against agent neutrality: they just illustrate one specific downside of it. I do not pursue further the question of how convincing the reply is here.

to do, all things considered. Third, in making room for the independent point of view of the agent, which amounts to counting their welfare differently than the welfare of others, Scheffler is forced to understand burdens as welfare costs, robbing the proposal of some welcome neutrality with regard to this question.

Ratio satisficing utilitarianism, on the other hand, is not wedded to the idea that the agent's welfare has some independent normative significance. It is driven not by general axiological principle but by the specific intuitions related to the demandingness of theories, however this is understood in detail in the realm of morality. Although this must be spelled out a lot more, ratio satisficing utilitarianism is compatible with taking the objection from over-demandingness to be independent from disputes about axiology and therefore allows for a fully utilitarian account of what we have most reason to do, all things considered. At the same time, because of ratio satisficing utilitarianism's introduction of a moral permissibility-relevant threshold, it is still a riff on the idea of satisficing—i.e., doing enough without doing the best.

It is also clearly distinct from the previous versions of the satisficing strategy. It not only incorporates the gratuitous goodness principle and sidesteps the issues of utility satisficing utilitarianism but also avoids the problems with moral inefficiency that burden satisficing utilitarianism struggles with. For one, ratio satisficing utilitarianism gives us the correct verdicts in *Flowers and Train*. Since we may suppose that gifting the flowers to my neighbor is slightly more burdensome and only a little bit better than not giving the flowers to my neighbor, it plausibly falls below the efficiency threshold and is thus not obligatory (even though it would be better). And since blowing up the train would be disastrous, the substantial additional burden that condemning myself to certain doom brings with it appears to be gained back many times over in goodness, bringing it above the threshold and thus rendering it obligatory.

Moreover, ratio satisficing utilitarianism also avoids the three general problems that burden satisficing utilitarianism faces. First, like with burden satisficing utilitarianism, the question of how to individuate levels of burdensomeness arises. Ratio satisficing utilitarianism allows, other than burden satisficing utilitarianism, for an easy solution: we should adopt the fine-grained principle for individuation. This makes the gratuitous goodness principle clearly true without leading to the unacceptable verdicts of burden satisficing utilitarianism. If there is only a slight difference in burdensomeness with a substantial difference in goodness, as in the trolley example above, then the respective return on investment is sufficiently high to mandate the alternative with the better outcome. Second, it allows for leeway by, for instance, holding that the choice of the second charity is permissible because the additional goodness gained from the other need not be sufficient to justify the additional though

very minor burdens. Third, it does not force us to exert ourselves up to a certain point just in order to achieve trivial improvements. All told, ratio satisficing utilitarianism shines exactly where burden satisficing utilitarianism stumbles.

5. DISCOUNTING RATIO SATISFICING UTILITARIANISM?

In this and the next section I address two possible objections to ratio satisficing utilitarianism. One thing I do not commit to is any specific value for what the burden-utility ratio should be. Even beyond the general challenge of providing cardinal measurements for utility and for burdensomeness, deciding on a value for this requires careful consideration of different cases in combination with a more substantiated conception of burdensomeness than I can develop here. Still, I want to argue for a structural claim about this value: it is constant and thus insensitive to where on the absolute scale of burdensomeness the actions that we are comparing lie. This argument is necessary because some might initially be drawn to the opposite claim. To see why, it is helpful to look at cases with a peculiar structure: we start with a baseline action that imposes no burdens at all. Call it a_1 . We then add to the alternatives an action a_2 that, relative to a_1 , has greater absolute burdensomeness and secures an outcome better by some absolute amount, with $BUR(a_1, a_{1+1})$ being sufficiently high to make a_1 impermissible. We can now iterate this procedure by introducing a further alternative a_3 , which differs from a_2 by the same absolute amounts of goodness and burdensomeness as a_2 differs from a_1 , and so on. With this, we can reach obligations that impose arbitrarily high burdens.³⁴

To illustrate, take the following example.³⁵ You can donate different sums of money, and we are trying to figure out how much you are morally obligated to donate. Let us say that donating €50 to save one life is worth it. Your donations have the following effects:

Donation in €	Number of Lives Saved
0	0
50	1
100	2
150	3
...	...
1,000	20
1,050	21

³⁴ For a structurally similar case, cf. Wessels, "Beyond the Call of Duty," 93–95.

³⁵ This example is adapted from Wessels, "Beyond the Call of Duty," 94.

It seems that if the first donation is worth it (i.e., if we ought to move from €0 to €50), then we also are obligated to take every further step if we adopt a constant threshold for the burden-utility ratio. Depending on how much money you have maximally available, it seems that we could reach the point where you are obligated to give it all up.

Now, given that my arguments against the existence of an absolute burden threshold are sound, *that* we can reach burdens of this level should in itself not be objectionable. But we might have a more subtle worry about ratio satisficing utilitarianism that cases like this bring into the light—namely, *how fast* we reach this level of burdensomeness. In keeping the threshold for a sufficient burden-utility ratio constant, we treat any step of this iterative procedure exactly like the first. Even if in absolute terms, we are already dealing with a highly burdensome action, the improvements that we are required to bring about once the next alternative has been introduced is the same as the improvements that the first alternative we have introduced has brought. And this might seem implausible: Should we not be sensitive to the fact that a few steps into the procedure, we demand things of someone who already is under enormously burdensome obligations? Should we not give more leeway to those who already shoulder large burdens than we give to those who have yet to strain their backs?

Many would, it seems, answer positively. Ratio satisficing utilitarianism would then improperly balance burdens and marginal goodness. If we share this impression, there is a remedy in reach. Following Ulla Wessels, we might argue like this:

Supererogation boils down to granting the agent, as an agent, a *discount* in matters of morality. Yet we need not stop at a discount. We could also give the agent a *bulk* discount, an additional discount for cases in which she is already burdened. Hence, we could ascribe to the agent for the *same* moral yield fewer additional obligations the worse off she is or the more she has already done for morality.³⁶

Wessels's idea is that the required burden-utility ratio should be higher the greater the absolute levels of burdensomeness of the actions compared are: if the actions compared are not very burdensome in absolute terms, the sufficiency threshold for the return on investment is lower, while it is higher if the actions compared are very burdensome in absolute terms. This still avoids positing an absolute limit to the burdensomeness of an obligatory action but slows down the acceleration of burdens: the higher on the burdensomeness spectrum we go, the higher the rewards must be to obligate us to move further.

36 Wessels, "Beyond the Call of Duty," 95.

Incorporating this idea into ratio satiscing utilitarianism is possible, but it makes the whole thing a little cumbersome. One way to do it is to introduce an exponential function $f: x \mapsto c^x$ and apply it to the levels of burdensomeness. We would then calculate the burden-utility ratio like this:

$$\text{BUR}(a, b) = \frac{\text{goodness}(a) - \text{goodness}(b)}{f(\text{burdens}(a)) - f(\text{burdens}(b))}.$$

Since f grows exponentially, the difference in the f -values get larger the higher the initial values of absolute burdensomeness are, lowering the value of the burden-utility ratio that we get in the end.

I do not see this modification as really necessary. The impression that a flexible sufficiency threshold is needed stems, I think, from consideration of “real-world” cases like the donation example above. And in these cases, it appears immensely plausible that there is a difference between going from donating nothing to donating €50 and going from donating €1,000 to donating €1,050. That is certainly true. But it is also perfectly compatible with a constant threshold. The reason is that the amount of money we spend does not have a fixed exchange rate to individual utility. Instead, money has diminishing marginal utility. If we understand burdens as welfare costs, then this already explains why even with a constant threshold for how much welfare we must be prepared to sacrifice for a certain moral gain, the first increase in the amount donated being obligatory is easier to justify than the five-hundredth increase being obligatory. Due to the diminishing marginal individual utility of money, the welfare costs in making this improvement go up. And insofar as this holds not only for money but for most of the resources we can use to promote utility (like time, material goods, hard work, etc.), similar considerations apply to those. Because we do not directly exchange our own welfare for general utility but rather exchange it indirectly via welfare-giving resources, and because these resources often have diminishing marginal individual utility, a constant sufficiency threshold for additional welfare sacrifices leads to a flexible rate on the level of resources. Unless personal utility itself exhibits some form of discontinuity or dampening, I see no reason why we should allow for flexibility on the level of individual and general utility.

But what if we were to understand burdens differently—namely, as needed effort or willpower? I do not think this would change much. Let us again look at a (very stylized) real-world example. Instead of monetary donations, we can now think of the relevant burden as hours of strenuous labor (in the sense that doing this labor requires willpower). Now, either it is the case that once we have already put twenty hours in, putting in another hour requires more

willpower than the first took—in which case the situation is exactly the same as above because it is not the sufficiency threshold that changes but the amounts inputted—or putting in the twenty-first hour takes exactly as much willpower, and we still have this amount of willpower left. Then I fail to see what counts in favor of treating this differently from the first: the moral yield is, after all, well worth it. I therefore see no reason to modify ratio satisficing utilitarianism along the proposed lines.

6. TROUBLE AT THE BORDER?

Views that posit some sort of threshold, like the satisficing views I consider here, are often subject to problems when we consider cases in which stuff happens close to this threshold. This is what we see with utility satisficing utilitarianism and burden satisficing utilitarianism. We might therefore expect similar trouble at the border with ratio satisficing utilitarianism. Ratio satisficing utilitarianism, after all, also posits a relevant threshold, though the kind and location of this threshold differ from its predecessors. Fortunately, this worry is unfounded. For the existence of a threshold is not enough to pose problems: only some thresholds do. To see this more clearly, let us look back at how the thresholds of utility satisficing utilitarianism and burden satisficing utilitarianism work. In both cases, we take one dimension of what is relevant for moral permissibility—utility in the case of utility satisficing utilitarianism and burdensomeness in the case of burden satisficing utilitarianism—and set a threshold for this dimension that limits when and how alterations along this dimension can influence permissibility. This would make sense if we were interested in only a single moral permissibility-relevant dimension. However, if we take the objection from overdemandingness seriously, then this is a mistake. There are two relevant dimensions, utility and burdensomeness, both of which we need to consider. By positing a unidimensional threshold that applies to only one of these, we put on a normative eyepatch, making ourselves partly blind: we are unable to notice some alterations in a permissibility-relevant dimension, leading to a skewed picture of normative reality. This is what happens in the cases I have discussed above. If we wish to get these cases right, we need to have everything in view.

Ratio satisficing utilitarianism's threshold works quite differently. Instead of limiting the influence of one dimension, it concerns the precise relation between them. Because of this, we cannot have cases where differences in one dimension that should intuitively influence moral permissibility are inappropriately ignored by our theory. If the value of one dimension varies, it by necessity has an impact on the relation between the two dimensions and thus always

has some influence. It is therefore impossible to have a case where, because of the threshold, we lose sight of one of the factors that we deem important and go astray in our moral permissibility judgments.

Certainly, there are cases where a sufficient burden-utility ratio is only barely reached or failed, and an alternative with a better outcome but accompanying higher burdensomeness is merely permissible instead of obligatory (or vice versa). This does not seem to me problematic. If we feel, on the one hand, that this alternative should be classified as obligatory, then we have a problem not with the existence of a threshold but with its location. Ratio satisficing utilitarianism is perfectly compatible with quite different views about what the relevant burden-utility ratio is (and I do not defend here any one of these views). If, on the other hand, we have general reservations about the fact that a very small difference in a normatively relevant dimension (e.g., utility) can change the deontic status of an action, then this is not specific to ratio satisficing utilitarianism. Even nonsatisficing views like classical utilitarianism imply this, after all.

7. CONCLUSION

Classical utilitarianism is faced with the objection from overdemandingness. One response to this objection is to offer a concessive response by modifying the utilitarian theory of moral permissibility. Typically, this concessive response comes in the form of what I call the satisficing strategy, which gives up the traditional requirement of asking agents to do the best and asks them to do only good enough. The most prominent example of this, Slote's satisficing utilitarianism, turns out to be untenable; and Chappell's burden satisficing utilitarianism, while a substantial improvement, is faced with several problems that can be traced to Chappell's commitment to an absolute burden threshold. I argue that we should give up on such an absolute threshold and turn to ratio satisficing utilitarianism, according to which moral permissibility turns on the relation between the burdensomeness of the relevant actions and the utility gained by them. Ratio satisficing utilitarianism thus turns out to be the best version of the satisficing strategy on offer.

This result should be of interest not only to utilitarians. While I have generally focused on specifically utilitarian concerns—namely, regarding the underlying axiology with its prime focus on utility—many parts of my argument apply regardless of this commitment. All theories that allow for cardinally measurable moral yields have a ratio satisficing analogue with all the structural advantages I have canvassed. Instead of comparing the generated goodness or utility, we can simply compare the relevant moral yields achieved by the

respective actions, thereby tempering the demands of these other theories as well. And such a tempering might be needed, for it is not only classical utilitarianism that can ask much of agents.³⁷ Furthermore, if my arguments are sound, this also has implications for our understanding of the objection from overdemandingness quite generally. It is not the case that a theory can be classified as overly demanding simply because in certain situations, it asks some agent to endure a specified absolute level of burdens. Instead, we also must keep the moral stakes in clear view. Once we do this, we might, in many cases, even be able to level a reverse objection: theories that incorporate an absolute threshold of demandingness turn out to be unfavorably *underdemanding* when dispensing us of duties that, given the moral stakes, we could be expected to conform to.³⁸

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37 For instance, cf. Ashford, "The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism."

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