Internalization and Moral Demands

Since Peter Singer's publication of the seminal essay "Famine, Affluence and Morality", the discussion of the demands of famine relief has been merged with the topic of *demandingness* (Singer 1972; Kagan 1989; Unger 1996; Murphy 2000; Mulgan 2002; Cullity 2006; Miller 2004). It is generally held that people have obligation to relieve the suffering of those who are in need. But this obligation, as many philosophers believe, is not limitless. On the view of these philosophers, a reasonable moral theory will not impose excessive demands on an agent; otherwise, there is something wrong with the design of the theory itself. Call it the demandingness limitation:[1] If an agent's compliance with a moral theory will cause a substantial reduction in his well-being, this theory may be considered unacceptably demanding.[2] In contemporary normative ethics, there has been a debate over the

[1] This is also called the problem of demandingness. Holders of this view believe that a moral theory is problematic if it imposes excessive demands on agents. See, for instance, Mackie (1977, pp. 129-134), Williams (1981, p. 18), Griffin (1996, pp. 90-1), Scheffler (1992, p. 102), Kumar (1999, pp. 275-309), and Herman (2000, pp. 29-45).

[2] Apart from the impact on agents' well-being, there is a different sense of demandingness: A moral theory is demanding because it is motivationally difficult for agents to comply with it. As indicated in the text, the demandingness limitation that I discuss in this paper is about well-being. The distinction between the different senses of demandingness is discussed in Keith Horton's unpublished Ph. D. thesis *The Humanitarian Case for Giving to Aid Agencies* (Reading University, UK, 2002, pp. 124-5). Horton attributes the distinction to G. A. Cohen, who uses the terminology of "costliness" and

plausibility of the demandingness limitation and, specifically, over whether people in affluent countries should bear great sacrifice to assist the needy in poor countries.[3]

Amidst this debate, there is a small but critical area which has received little attention. That is, an agent's internalization of a moral theory *affects* the burden of demands that he faces: Moral demands are either accepted by an agent or they are not. If they are accepted, the agent will structure his life in accordance with the theory's demands. This may minimize the possibility of conflicts between the demands of morality and the agent's life plans (Murphy 2000, p. 43). For instance, an agent in modern society seldom needs to pay extra efforts to follow the prohibitions against parricide and enslavement. The reason is that, for most of us, the need to comply with these prohibitions has already been built into our way of life. And our plans, emotions, and attitudes, etc. have been tuned in accordance with such demands. In contrast, however, if a certain moral theory is not accepted by an agent at all, he may find it difficult to follow its demands without interrupting the order of

---

"difficulty" in Cohen (1978, pp. 238-40; 2000, pp. 20-6).

[3] To put it crudely, in Kagan's terminology, Singer (1972), Kagan (1989), and Unger (1996) are moral extremists, who believe that the demands of morality (especially in the case of famine relief) are great and they require agents to make huge sacrifice. In contrast, Scheffler (1992), Griffin (1996), Kumar (1999), and Miller (2004) are moral moderates who think that although agents have to assist the needy in poor countries, agents may still permissibly live largely the kind of life that they have been leading in modern consumerist society.

his own life. Most typically, this is what we come across in the case of famine relief when the moral extremists propose that agents in the affluent countries should sacrifice greatly in response to cases of humanitarian emergency.

The demandingness limitation states that if an agent's compliance with a moral theory causes a significant reduction in his well-being, then the theory is inherently problematic. Here, to assess the demands of a moral theory, we need an understanding of how the life of an agent may become worsened; we need to set a baseline against which the level of an agent's well-being can be revealed as worse than before. On this matter, a predominant understanding is provided by – what Murphy calls – the baseline of factual status-quo (FSQ).[4] On this assessment, we take an agent's *actual* situation as given and compare how far his well-being is affected from the time he begins to fully comply with the moral theory. However, since the baseline of FSQ understands moral demands in light of the *actual conflict* between the demands of morality and an agent's well-being, it pays no regard to the distinction between demands that are acceptable to the agent and demands which

[4] The term "the baseline of factual status-quo" is given by Murphy (2000, pp. 35-42). However, the idea of this baseline has been prevailing among philosophers in the discussion regarding the problem of demandingness, e.g. Mulgan (2002, p. 4), Cullity (2006, pp. 90-5 and pp. 132-4), and Kagan (1989, pp. 232-3).

are not in its assessment.

There are limitations in merely employing the baseline of the factual status-quo to assess moral demands. People will internalize some prevailing code of ethics in their societies anyway. As a result, some moral views will inevitably appear more demanding for an agent to follow and some less. But the rise of this difference in demandingness is relative to what the agent has accepted. Here, I am not saying that the demandingness of a moral theory is simply determined by the degree of internalization alone; yet, as internalization does play a significant role in the determination of a moral theory's demands, it will be inadequate if we discuss the demandingness limitation merely in light of the baseline of the factual status-quo. The aim of this paper is not to propose the abandonment of the baseline of the factual status-quo altogether. Rather, I suggest we look at moral demands from a broader perspective: We may identify moral demands not merely from the conflicts they have with an agent's desires and preferences; we may also identify moral demands from the low quality of an agent's life as he adapts to the demands' constraints. Without paying heed to this point, we may overlook the complexity behind the phenomenon that a moral theory appears demanding to an agent. This limit of understanding may undermine the force of the argument on which the

demandingness limitation builds.[5]

1. The Baseline of the Normative Status-Quo

Suppose a serial killer obtains great pleasure from murdering people. What will be the burden of demands for this agent if he is morally required to refrain from performing the murderous actions? Obviously, he will lose the pleasure of taking innocent lives. There will be other considerations, too: This sick person may – in the long run – live a better life if he learns to respect humanity. But in essence, the idea that even this serial killer bears sacrifices captures the characteristic focus of the baseline of the factual status-quo. That is, the baseline looks at "how things are now and can be expected to be in the future" as an agent begins to comply fully with a moral theory (Murphy, p. 35).[6]

[5] Note that though Murphy thinks the baseline of the factual status-quo provides the "best available answer" to the problem of the assessment of demands, Murphy's discussion is part of an attack on the force of demandingness objections against moral theories, given the indeterminacy of the baseline for assessing those demands. See Murphy, pp. 34-5.

[6] Although it is possible to develop the baseline of factual status-quo with regard to different theories of well-being, Murphy thinks that we do not have to do so. On his view, when an extreme demand is imposed on agents, "all plausible accounts of loss are likely to yield the same verdict." (p. 18) Of course, the point is that in the case of the serial killer, he may suffer a great loss if he restrains from murdering people. But this loss is attributable to a desire-satisfaction theory, not to an objective theory of the good life.

The situation of this serial killer can be understood differently. We could say that it was *not* demanding for him to refrain from killing people. The reason is that this serial killer should not have done the murders anyway. His decision to stop performing the actions will only take away the pleasure that he ought not to have. According to this view, which we call the baseline of the normative status-quo (NSQ), if certain goods are something that an agent ought not to obtain, the fact that he fails to keep them will not count as his loss. How should we understand the sense of "ought" here? We may understand the idea in light of commonsense morality or of a minimal morality that people generally accept in society (Murphy, pp. 36-9).

The baseline of the normative status-quo has its own intuitive appeal. It seems to be undemanding for a thief to return stolen goods (assuming that he is driven to theft by extreme poverty), but it is demanding if a person is required to contribute the same amount of money from his own pocket for famine relief. For another example, consider these two scenarios. In the first case, Mary has a healthy son. If she hands over this child to a cold-blooded surgeon, the surgeon may use the child's organs to save the lives of five dying children. Here, it seems unacceptably demanding for Mary to sacrifice her son to save the five children. Compare it with the second case: Mary's son is dying of kidney failure and there are four other

children who desperately need different organs for transplantation, too. Then, Mary comes across an orphan boy who is fit and happens to have the right organs to save all these dying children. Now, according to the baseline of NSQ, it is *not demanding* for Mary to refrain from using the orphan boy to save her son (and the other children). She should not kill the boy anyway.

Note the difference between two notions of costs. The first is a moralized notion, which is presupposed by the baseline of the normative status-quo. On this view, if an agent should not perform an action to obtain certain benefits, the fact that he is morally required not to perform this action does not impose a cost on him. Therefore, on this moralized notion of costs, there are no such things as costs for which an agent chooses to act morally. The second is a non-moralized notion of costs, which is employed by the baseline of factual status-quo. On this view, even when an agent refrains from acting immorally, he may bear sacrifices too. For a certain benefit, if an agent has to give it up in order to comply with the demands of morality, then no matter whether the agent's original acquisition of the benefit is morally permissible or not, it will still be taken as a cost of the agent's complying action. "[A]ccording to the baseline of the factual status quo," Murphy states, "a moral theory makes demands on an agent to the extent of any losses he does or would suffer just

because of his compliance with the moral theory." (p. 35.)

As between the baseline of the factual status-quo and that of the normative status-quo, Murphy thinks that FSQ is more defensible. The first problem with NSQ is that this baseline may not be neutral to different normative positions. The demandingness limitation suggests a criterion against which moral theories are evaluated, and a baseline is set in order to assess whether the demands of a moral theory are unjustifiably high. Here, if we allow the contents of a certain moral view to determine the setting of this baseline, then demands stemming from this moral view will certainly be assessed more favorably than those of others (Murphy, pp. 38 -9). However, as we shall see later on in the paper, a similar problem may be found in regard to the baseline of the factual status-quo, too.

The second problem with the baseline of NSQ is that the content of the minimal morality presupposed by NSQ may be indeterminate. It is in fact a controversial and unclear matter concerning how far people in the affluent countries should sacrifice to assist the needy in poor countries. So, insofar as there is no consensus here, NSQ may provide no useful verdict in objection to the demands of moral extremism either.

Finally, the last problem with NSQ is that, on its view, there are no moral costs for an agent in complying with demands of the minimal morality. This is, however, contrary to our moral experience. There are a number of cases in which commonsense morality generates extreme demands. For example, if one's family members suffer from severe long-term illness, one may have to live a hard life in order to look after them (Murphy, p. 37). In fact, if we look back to Mary's case, we may wonder whether it really is undemanding for Mary to refrain from killing the orphan boy if that is the only means to save her own child.

2. The Baseline of the Factual Status-Quo

Although we cannot use the normative status-quo as a baseline to assess demands, Murphy thinks that we do not have to neutralize *the influences of the normative status quo* either. In real life, an agent accepts the demands of a certain moral rule over others and these demands will tend to structure his life, including his desires, emotions, attitudes, etc., in accordance with the demands of this rule. As a result, there will be less conflict between his moral commitments and his life plans. Taking into account these effects, it would often be *less demanding* for the agent to comply with this type of moral rule than with others. Such effects of internalization are

regarded by Murphy as the biases that cannot be removed in the assessment of the demand of the moral rule. He says:

> If our aim is to assess actual demands on actual people, we have no reason to want to try to avoid this kind of bias; still it is instructive that we have here reached the limit of our ability to assess demands in a way that is fully neutral between all moral conceptions (p. 43).

There are reasons for Murphy to hold this view. In the assessment procedure, it will be important to maintain a firm grip on an agent's actual experience (of losses) as he begins to comply with a certain moral rule, for the internalization effects of a moral rule are inextricably linked with the agent's identity. If we remove such effects, we may lose grasp of the subject of investigation; that is, it is *this particular agent* whom we are analyzing, not someone else with a different set of moral beliefs. However, as we shall see, keeping such effects in the assessment procedure may invite other problems, which show the limits of the baseline of the factual status-quo.

First, it can be arbitrary that an agent accepts one moral theory instead of another. Had the agent lived in a different society, he might have internalized a different moral

theory (or a different moral view). If a particular moral theory were not the normative status quo, the agent in society would not adapt to its demands. As a result, this moral theory would be more demanding than it might otherwise be. Thus, the baseline of the factual status-quo does not provide us with a stable verdict regarding the demands of the same moral theory in counterfactual circumstances. On the assessment provided by this baseline, the demandingness of a moral theory is always determined *in relation to* certain dispositions of an agent in a particular society. I shall expound the point in section three.

Second, on the baseline of the factual status-quo, the demandingness of a moral theory may not be seen as a problematic feature of the theory at all. On the contrary, it had better be seen as the contingent interactive effects between an agent and the moral theory. Remember the case of the serial killer. It may be extremely demanding for him to abide by the prohibition on killing. However, we cannot attribute the instance of this extreme demandingness *directly* to features of the moral prohibition itself. For most of us, it is not demanding to follow the same rule. This illustrates that a moral theory (e.g., a theory which generates the prohibition on killing) can be demanding without being objectionable.[7]

[7] There may be a difference between following a moral rule (and I take a restriction to be one kind of rule) and following a moral theory: The rule against ruthless killing may be generated either by

This consequence is contrary to the presumption involved in the demandingness limitation. Presumably, a moral theory generates extreme demands because the theory contains certain problematic features. However, a moral theory can also generate extreme demands as a result of the influence of other circumstantial factors. In that case, this theory may appear demanding, but not objectionably so. In fact, the case of the serial killer shows that, by a certain coincidence, any rule of morality can be demanding, judged by the standard of the baseline of the factual status-quo.

Third, a moral theory may be demanding even if it is not judged so by the baseline of the factual status-quo. In fact, an agent's plans and projects may cohere well with the demands of the moral theory he accepts; but this does not entail that the agent has not borne a high cost in following the moral theory in his life. Look at the lives of the women who live in Taliban societies. They may not complain about the fact that they do not receive proper education in schools; they may even be content with the

---

utilitarianism or by Kant's deontological theory or by other moral theories. When agents follow this rule, it is unclear which moral theory they are following. So, in a particular context, when agents find it demanding to follow a rule, what is demanding for them may be the rule itself; they may not be concerned about, or be aware of, the theory which provides justification for the rule. In a different case, some agents may be committed followers of a particular moral theory, utilitarianism, Kant's theory or some other. Then, if these agents find a moral rule derived from their moral theory demanding, this demandingness is attributable to the moral theory itself.

life they lead as illiterate housewives. Yet, the absence of conflict here between the agents' existing life plans and the demands of the Taliban ethics does not show that following the Taliban code of conduct is undemanding. For there is an alternative way of life in which these women could have achieved a much greater fulfillment than what they obtain with their present life conditions. So, there are aspects of demands that the assessment provided by the baseline of the factual status quo cannot capture and this sense of demandingness may be identified by an alternative viewpoint, viz., the idea of whole-life demandingness. I will discuss this view in greater length in section four.

3. The Relativity of Demandingness

The demands of morality and prudence do not always exclude each other. If we go back sufficiently to the stage when agents accept a moral theory, we will see that agents' construction of life plans is not independent from their endorsement of certain moral viewpoints. Few people in our society, for instance, will find it demanding to comply with prohibitions against murder, parricide, robbery, and torture. People pick up these basic moral prohibitions as they learn to pick up other facts of the natural world (Griffin 1988, pp. 24-5; 1996, pp. 72-3). Moral demands, in this manner, do not situate outside the boundaries of an agent's conceptions of good

life. Quite the contrary, they determine the form of the agent's plans and desires from the inside and give content to his emotions and attitudes.[8]

Imagine there is a Norwegian society where people start their lives with the firm belief that they should sacrifice 60% of their income for starving people in distant countries. Then, in these Norwegian people's perceptions, the possibility that they may use the money otherwise has been put out of mind, or "silenced". It is not that they do not see that the money could be used otherwise, but the operation of their basic life plans may not be faltered by the lack of the resources they forsake here. Of course, when they reflect on their psychological reaction, the Norwegians will not take much notice of the fact that they are complying with this moral rule – in much the same way as we do not take much notice when we comply with the prohibitions on parricide and murder.

Note that putting out of mind, or silencing of, possible actions that are prohibited is

[8] The starting point for thinking ethically is not a time at which people are conceived of as standing outside any ethical context. Rather it is a time at which people are conceived of as having grown up in a certain society, having perhaps started a family and having taken in the major beliefs of their society. See Annas (2000, p. 297).

just one part of the internalization process of the demands of a moral theory. Other parts include “trimming” and “branching.” First, where an agent has accepted a particular moral theory, he will try to trim his plans to make them congruent with the demands of the internalized morality (trimming). Second, if the agent has some basic moral or prudential beliefs, these beliefs will largely determine how other plans develop (branching). Taken together, trimming, branching, and silencing constitute an adjustment process through which an agent develops his life plans in accordance with the constraints of morality.

Here, we cannot say that internalization “reduces” the demandingness of moral theories. An agent’s internalization of a moral view involves the evolution of a distinct identity. This is a process in which he adapts his attitudes, emotions, and ways of life so as to comply with the moral injunctions he has internalized. Thus, internalization does not alter the intrinsic quality of a moral theory; it is the agent who changes himself to meet the characteristic requirements of the theory. In fact, a process with a similar structure takes place after a person has won a lottery or got a substantial increment in salary for a sufficiently long period of time. When a person has got used to the impact of the good news in his daily life, he will adjust the points of reference of preference satisfaction to a different level. Then the great

improvement of his material conditions may not be translated into an equally great leap in his sense of well-being in the long term. Just as winning the lottery might not make one happy, because one's desires grow more voracious, likewise accepting a severe morality might not keep one from being happy, because one's desires shrink and adapt so as to fit with one's moral commitments (Railton 2008).

We can summarize a few fixed points here. First, *in most cases*, it is not demanding for an agent to follow the moral theory that he has fully internalized. Second, the determination of demandingness is often a social matter. Had an agent grown up in a different society, he would have accepted some other moral views. Because of these points, the assessment of demandingness can be a *relative* matter within a substantial range of cases. If agents have got used to the demand of a 30% sacrifice of their income to the needy, it is less demanding for them to follow a principle which requires a 35% sacrifice of income than for those who have got used to the demands of a 5% or 20% sacrifice of their income to the needy.

To press the point further, there is the No-Difference Thesis: Within a range of cases, it will make no substantial difference in factual status-quo demandingness whether the Good Norwegians (or we in the affluent countries) have accepted a requirement

to contribute 5%, 30% or 60% of income to the needy. But this thesis is controversial. Before I discuss it further in the next section, I need to stress two points.

First, though internalization can often help relieve the burden of demands that an agent faces, this point has limits. Given human nature as it is, there are things that an agent cannot do without forming a substantially persistent desire to act otherwise. Take the case of a requirement to bind one's feet. Such a requirement involves crippling oneself for the rest of one's life. So, even if one fully accepts the moral necessity of the action, one may still have some recalcitrant desire opposing the requirement one has internalized, viz. the desire to walk naturally, the desire to be free from the long-term pain foot binding causes, etc. Thus, the requirements of certain moral practices can be demanding in an absolute sense because, plastic as human nature can be, it is not absolutely so. On this line of thought, the No-Difference Thesis applies only within fix boundaries. If a moral theory requires agents to sacrifice everything to the poor, however effective a socialization policy is, it is unlikely that ordinary agents can accept the rule without feeling some losses of

well-being.[9]

The second point is that some moral theories are not demanding to follow, even if the agents have not internalized them to any extent. I am thinking of, for example, moral egoism. The lack of internalization may make no difference to the demands at all even if an agent is to comply fully with this theory.[10] (Will it be demanding for an agent to become egoistic? If he has got used to the life of giving generous aid to the poor, will it affect his state of well-being if he is now required to pay much more attention to his own interest? But the principle of egoism will permit the agent to make considerable contributions to the needy, if that will make him happier. – It will be difficult if he is required to benefit the needy from the motive of pleasing himself.)

4. The Idea of Whole-life Demandingness

The No-Difference Thesis is not new. It marks only an ideal state achievable by internalization. That is, there is no systematic conflict *at all* for people to live their

[9] This point concerns the capabilities of ordinary agents. Admittedly, some people may have an extraordinary character, which enables them to contribute everything to the poor and still live a good life. But people with such a character are quite exceptional, and not good reference points when we are assessing possible moral requirements.

[10] Another example may be Nozickian individualism. But even though this theory may impose almost no demands on agents to assist the needy, this theory requires the agents to abide by a range of negative duties.

ordinary lives and to fulfill the demands of morality. As a consequence, regardless of whether a moral theory required an agent to contribute 5% or 50% of their income to the needy, they would still be able to comply with the theory and live with fulfillment.[11]

The No-Difference Thesis may be objectionable because it relies on a single-sided notion of demand, viz. the baseline of the factual status-quo. In this assessment, provided that an agent can modify his expectations and life plans to fit the requirements of a moral theory, there will be no factual status-quo demands. However, apart from the baseline of the factual status-quo, demands may also be assessed on a whole-life perspective. An agent who shapes her life in conformity with Theory A might have a less meager and constricted life than she would have had if she had instead shaped her life in conformity with Theory B.

Many cultural and ethical practices are costly to follow not because they conflict with an agent's existing life plan, but because following them will undermine the agent's capability to live a decent life. Examples include female circumcision, feet

[11] Kagan argues that a loving relation is not necessarily established on the grounds that agents always give special favor to their partners (1989, pp. 397-9). See also McMahan (1997, p. 118). For an opposing view, see Miller (2004, pp. 361-2).

binding, etc.[12] Using the whole-life assessment, we easily see the difference in demandingness between the theory that requires an agent to sacrifice 5% of his income and the one that requires the same agent to sacrifice 50%. The agent who has to contribute 50% will have much less room to save money, say, for rainy days – regardless of what his actual life plan is.

Here, note that the whole-life assessment adopts a different method of comparison from the assessment provided by the baseline of the factual status-quo. Whereas the baseline of the factual status-quo assesses demands by looking at *effects on a single life* as an agent changes to comply with various moral theories (or stay within a given a moral theory), the whole-life assessment looks at *different possible lives*, each lived under a different moral theory.

Suppose we can come up with a conception of the total utility of a life process.[13] Then, the whole-life assessment compares the total utility of lives lived as a whole

[12] Is the requirement of monogamy an example of such demanding practices too? Would some people be living much better lives as a whole if they were allowed to keep more than one wife? Should we understand certain people's acts of infidelity as an indicator of their recalcitrant desires (to be "normal" human beings) or as an indicator of nothing but their own moral weaknesses?

[13] For the concept of whole-life utility and its difficulties (such as in the case of conflicting preferences), see Bricker (1980).

within a single moral theory (e.g. the utility of a cradle-to-grave utilitarian versus the utility of a cradle-to-grave Kantian, etc.). Assessing demands in comparison to the baseline of the factual status-quo considers the utility of lives not just as an instant, but as paths extending from the present to the future under the influence of one or another moral theory (Murphy, pp. 45-7). We may, for instance, consider the utility of a person's life who continues to follow commonsense-morality from now to death versus the utility of this person who *changes* now from commonsense-morality to utilitarianism and complies with this moral theory until death, etc.[14]

I have explained the concept of whole-life assessment in virtue of its comparison between different normative theories. However, the force of this assessment is best shown in the cases when agents' lives are handicapped by the existence of some identifiable evils, such as the cultural practices which impose harm on the human body or the demands which commandeer most of the agents' resources to relieve the suffering of the needy (See also Williams 1985, pp. 42-3). In these types of case, I argue that great (whole-life) demands are made because there are counterfactual lives in which these agents can live without bearing the sacrifices.

[14] The idea of "whole-life total utility" is employed here only to represent a conception of whole-life well-being. The idea can be unpacked in light of either a hedonist view or other objective theories of well-being.

Finally, although I point out the limits of the factual status-quo baseline earlier in the paper, it is not my intention to replace it with the concept of whole-life demandingness. I think the two assessments complement – rather than exclude – each other; in a *complete assessment of demands*, we have reason to look not merely at the costs of the changes that will be borne by the agent if he is to follow a new moral theory, but also at the total value of the life that the agent could have lived had he been a faithful complier with the new moral theory from the start.

In what follows, I will consider some worries about the account of whole-life demandingness. First, remember that this position involves an absolutist assumption. That is, some factors are considered to be essential, such as bodily integrity, basic autonomy or freedom of movement, etc., for the maintenance of an agent's well-being. But is it possible that different cultures prescribe different ways of life and each of them provides an incommensurably unique meaning to the lives of their participating members?[15] Can a Taliban woman flourish as a devoted housewife, even though she has not been given the chance to receive proper school education?

[15] Might it be analogous to the case in which different people have their own weaknesses of character that do not prevent them from living lives which are meaningful?

However, this objection might not amount to more than a reminder for us to maintain an open attitude for alternative possibilities of decent life forms. The objection will become less plausible if critics insist that *whatever* a traditional society does to individuals, the practice will always have "its own" value and will enable them to flourish within its social and cultural conditions.

There is a second challenge. That is, the structure of traditional societies is not as atomistic in nature as that of modern society, and there is a dynamic coherence among the different aspects of the Taliban woman's life. On this argument, we cannot single out a particular aspect of life from this network and ask for a replacement of it in light of our evaluation. So, supporters of the whole-life assessment could not have held that "other things being equal, this Taliban woman could have lived a better life." For, the things taken to be equal certainly will not be so in reality if the agent is to pursue a life that is categorically forbidden in her society. Here, the crux of the matter is not that the agents are unable to withdraw from these practices, but the availability of the alternatives is not as real as the counterfactual statement may suggest (see, e.g., Taylor 1985, and Sandel 1982). As a result, the whole-life assessment which presupposes this comparison may lose its appeal, too.

In reply, I think this objection has erroneously tied together the soundness of the assessment methodology with the practical feasibility of the counterfactual lives under comparison. For whether particular practices are demanding on a whole-life basis is not dependent on the practical feasibility of these agents' departing from the practices. Even if it is impossible for the agents to stop following the practices, or for the agents to stop being committed to the value attached to these practices, this will not change the nature of harm that is done to their lives.

In fact, following this line of thought, bear in mind that it is a feature of the whole-life assessment that it makes judgements that are independent of the agents' subjective evaluation. So, the possibility that there may be divergence between the two judgements should not surprise us. A moral theory may be considered demanding on a whole-life basis, but the way of life that is brought along by agents' compliance with the theory can be welcome by them (Bykvist 2006, pp. 273-4). The illiterate Taliban women might be, however unlikely, content with their role as housewives in society. As a result, they might not be concerned about the wide range of possibilities that they could live their lives if they received proper school education.

There is a second kind of divergence. A way of life can be less demanding (on a whole-life basis) than they are when it is viewed from agents' perspective on a factual status-quo baseline. An example is from Miller (2004, p. 362), where he remarks about the situation of the poor people in the United States:

> Many poor people in the United States would not be burdened by their poverty if, through some project of self-transformation, they made their life-goals similar enough to well-adjusted hermit monks' and nuns'. This does not entail that their lives are not worse because of their poverty.

Here, even if there will be great potential for agents to make achievement if they appreciate the value of leading an ascetic's life, this alternative does not affect the fact that these agents are suffering from poverty in reality. The reference points of well-being of these agents are set on different scales; the prospect of leading an ascetic's life has no appeal to the agents, and it does not cohere with their expectation at all.

In conclusion, if we accept the view I propose above, what happens to the objection that certain moral theories (e.g., act-utilitarianism) make excessive demands on agents? I think the viewpoint I presented in this paper does not refute the objection

as such. Rather, it adjusts the assessment procedure of the demandingness limitation. In this paper, I propose that we widen the scope of evaluation of demands from the baseline of factual status-quo to include the whole-life assessment. On this new view, some moral theories may be objectionable either because they conflict with people's existing moral practices, or because they impose excessive whole-life demands on agents.

But what progress have we made? How should we conceive the whole-life demandingness of a moral theory like act-utilitarianism? This question, I think, is not to be settled by a mechanical operation. What would people be like if they had internalized the demands fully from the very beginning of their lives? How well (or badly) would these people live if they managed to take the value of, say, global compassion seriously? Here, as we start to ponder about the whole-life demandingness of a moral theory, we will get into a heuristic process: We give ourselves room to imagine what people could have become if they lived differently. Still, in some cases, the assessment may have negative results – people just won't thrive under such-and-such conditions of life. But in other cases, the inquiring process *per se* may enable the inquirers to gather the courage to see what they can do and should do in response to the morally challenging situations which people

have not come across before.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented in 2008 at the Tenth Conference of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies, Kadish Center for Morality, Law and Public Affairs, UC Berkeley. I am grateful to the audience for a helpful discussion, especially to Steve Nathanson. Thanks are due to Roger Lee, Luke Mulhall, Wong Wai-Hung, Joseph Chan, Leonard Kahn and Peter Chau who read and commented on earlier drafts. I would also like to acknowledge Brad Hooker for his valuable advice on the paper throughout the various stages of its development.

Reference

Annas, J. (2000). *Voices of Ancient Philosophy: An Introductory Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bricker, P. (1980). Prudence. *The Journal of Philosophy*. 77 (7). 381-401.

Bykvist, K. (2006). Prudence for Changing Selves. *Utilitas*. 18. 264-283.

Cohen, G. A. (1978). *Karl Marx's Theory of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cohen, G. A. (2000). If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're so Rich? *Journal of Ethics*. Doi: 10.1023/A:1009836317343

Cullity, G. (2006). *The Moral Demands of Affluence*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Griffin, J. (1986). *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Griffin, J. (1996). *Value Judgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Herman, B. (2000). Morality and Everyday Life. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*. 74. 29-45.

Kagan, S. (1989). *The Limits of Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kumar, R. (1999). Defending the Moral Moderate: Contractualism and Common Sense. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. 28 (4). 275-309.

McMahan, J. (1997). The Limits of Nationalism. In R. McKim and J. McMahan (Eds.), *The Morality of Nationalism* (pp. 107-38). New York: Oxford University Press.

Mackie, J. L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin.

Miller, R. (2004). Beneficence, Duty and Distance. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32(4). 357-83.

Mulgan, T. (2002). *The Demands of Consequentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murphy, L. (2000). *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Railton, P. (2008). The Problem of Well-Being: Respect, Equality, and the Self. *ISUX-X, Tenth Conference of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies*, Kadish Center for Morality, Law and Public Affairs, University of California, Berkeley, 2008. http://fas-philosophy.rutgers.edu/chang/Papers/Railton-Well-BeingAndEquality.pdf. Accessed 30 August 2010.

Sandel, M. J. (1982). *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Scheffler, S. (1992). *Human Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Singer, P. (1972). Famine, Affluence and Morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(3), 229-243.

Taylor, C. (1985). *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Unger, P. (1996). *Living High & Letting Die: Our illusion of Innocence*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Williams, B. (1981). *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.