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Kant and Overdemandingness I: The Demandingness of Imperfect Duties

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Abstract

The Overdemandingness Objection maintains that an ethical theory or principle that demands too much should be rejected, or at least moderated. Traditionally, overdemandingness is considered primarily a problem for consequentialist ethical theories. Recently, Kant and Kantian ethics have also become part of the debate. This development helps us better understand both overdemandingness and problems with Kant's ethics. In this, the first of a pair of papers, we introduce the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties as well as a framework for understanding the overdemandingness objection that allows us to discuss overdemandingness across different ethical theories. We then consider two ways that Kantians have sought to avoid the implication that imperfect duties may be overly demanding: (1) via the *latitude* of imperfect duties, and (2) by the suggestion that the wider system of duties is self-moderating. We conclude that it is unclear whether the two most prominent ways of addressing the overdemandingness objection work, challenging them on their own terms, and observing that they are inapplicable to potential demandingness concerns pertaining to *perfect* duties.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Overdemandingness Objection maintains that an ethical theory or principle that demands too much should be rejected, or at least moderated. Traditionally, overdemandingness is considered primarily a problem for consequentialist ethical theories. Recently, Kant and Kantian ethics have also become part of the debate. This development helps us better understand both overdemandingness and problems with Kant's ethics.

There has been extensive discussion of the nature and demandingness of what Kant would call "imperfect duties", such as beneficence. Kant's conception of beneficence itself has been criticized as overdemanding (van Ackeren and Sticker, 2018), underdemanding (Hooker, 2000; Stohr, 2011),[1] and has been defended as just the right amount of demanding (Formosa & Sticker, 2019; Timmerman, 2018).[2] Alongside this, there is now also a growing literature concerning the potential overdemandingness of *perfect* duties, e.g., the duty not to lie or steal (Pinheiro Walla, 2015; van Ackeren and Sticker, 2015).

Both of these discussions are significant to the overdemandingness debate and normative ethics more widely. The discussion of imperfect duties allows us to better understand how Kantian ethics compares to Consequentialism[3] given the standard framework of the overdemandingness debate, as they both focus on what agents ought to do for others, specifically to make others happy. The discussion of perfect duties can help us better understand the scope and nature of the overdemandingness objection itself, as it expands the debate to prescriptions that have so far been neglected.

In this pair of papers, we have two goals. Firstly, we will contribute to a better understanding of overdemandingness by discussing how and to what extent it can be applied to Kantian ethics. Second, we will show that when applied to Kantian ethics, supposed overdemandingness objections are instead symptoms of other problems. This will help us better understand the scope of overdemandingness across the board of ethical theories.

In this first paper, we begin by introducing the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties as well as a framework for understanding the overdemandingness objection that allows us to discuss overdemandingness across different ethical theories (§2). We then explain how the *latitude* afforded by imperfect duties might alleviate overdemandingness concerns for Kant (§3). We explain why this is not necessarily the case (§4), as well as how the idea that duty is self-moderating fails to render the overdemandingness objection moot (§5). We conclude that it is unclear whether the two most prominent ways of addressing the overdemandingness objection work, challenging them on their own terms, and observing that they are inapplicable to potential demandingness concerns pertaining to *perfect* duties.

In the second paper, we scrutinize arguments and cases intended to show that overdemandingness objections can be leveled against perfect duties. We ultimately conclude that these objections are best understood as indicative of other problems in Kant's ethical theory, and that analysis through the lens of overdemandingness can obscure those problems. Moreover, our discussion will highlight the need for a theory that can adjudicate tensons between different claims of duties.

2 | KANT AND OVERDEMANDINGNESS: AN OVERVIEW

Working out whether Kantian ethics is properly targeted by overdemandingness objections is made more difficult by Kant's division of duties and by ambiguities within the overdemandingness debate. In this section, we provide a brief overview of pertinent aspects of Kantian ethics, before describing the state of discussion regarding overdemandingness.

2.1 | Perfect and Imperfect Duties in Kant

Kantian ethics is comprised of different types of duties. Most significantly, Kant distinguishes between *perfect* and *imperfect* duties, both derived from the Categorical Imperative.[4] Standard readings of this distinction maintain that when we universalize certain courses of action that we contemplate, then we might generate a contradiction. This can be a contradiction in conception, as when we *cannot imagine* that a course of action can be pursued or accepted by everyone and at the same time be successfully pursued or accepted by us. Kant's prime example is a lying promise. No one would believe our lying promise if everyone felt entitled to make such promises.[5] Such courses of action are ruled out by perfect duties. Perfect duties typically correspond to rights that others hold against the duty bearer.

There can also be courses of action that can be universalized without a contradiction in conception, but they yield a contradiction in the will. E.g., we *cannot rationally want to* live in a world in which no one ever assisted anyone in need, including when in mortal danger, even though such a world is conceivable. Kant believes that the latter type of contradiction reveals certain ends (beneficence and self-perfection) that everyone must adopt to avoid a world that cannot be rationally willed.[6,7] Adopting these obligatory ends is an imperfect duty (IV:424.3-13). There are no rights corresponding to these duties.[8]

"Imperfect" here does not mean that it is optional to adopt these ends. Agents are strictly required to adopt them (Pinheiro Walla, 2015, p. 734) and some of the actions that fall under it may even be strictly required in the way perfect duties are (Atterton, 2007, p. 141). Duties are imperfect in two senses: Firstly, they allow for leeway or *latitude* as to how we promote or realize obligatory ends (VI:390.6-7). This latitude applies most directly when determining what *means* we take to further obligatory ends in concrete situations. We can choose whether we want to donate money, volunteer our time, become politically active, etc. (cf. O'Neill, 1995). This type of latitude is simply a function of obligatory ends being general and typically requiring positive action to be promoted. There are usually numerous ways to do so.[9] There is also a conception of latitude according to which it extends to the question of *how much* we are to further obligatory ends (see section 3). Secondly, perfect duties enjoy *priority* over imperfect ones. We are never permitted to violate perfect duties, not even when promoting obligatory ends.[10]

For consequentialists, duties to the global poor are commonly considered the most concerning source of demandingness. For Kantians, these would largely fall under *beneficence*, the imperfect duty to promote other people's happiness or facilitate pursuit of their ends, including in cases of emergency and extreme need.[11] This makes imperfect duties a particularly fruitful case for studying the comparative dimension of overdemandingness.

2.2 | Overdemandingness Objections

As it stands, there are a variety of objections that are often grouped together under the label 'overdemandingness'. These include: Susan Wolf's (1982) case against Consequentialists and Kantians based on the argument that moral perfection is not an appealing ideal for humans; Fishkin's (1982) assumption that the scope of morality must be limited; Peter Railton's (1984) case against alienating forms of Consequentialism; Bernard Williams' (1973) integrity objection against Utilitarianism; as well as recent approaches that see overdemandingness as a form of psychological difficulty (Chappell, 2019; McElwee, 2016, 2022), constraint of options (Benn, 2016), or excessive responsibility (White, 2017). It is thus to some extent unclear what exactly the overdemandingness objection is. One of the desiderata of the debate is a terminologically clear understanding of it.

Philosophers who discuss the potential overdemandingness of Kant's ethics usually assume a broad understanding of the concept, according to which anything that is beyond "what can reasonably be expected of moral agents" (Formosa & Sticker, 2019, p. 625) is overdemanding. However, if we want to gain a proper understanding of how the overdemandingness objection plays out on a Kantian framework, and, especially, if we want to be able to work out how Kant fares compared to other theories, we need to base our discussion on a terminologically concise

conception of demandingness that is not developed to assess potential overdemandingness problems for just one type of theory[12] but can be applied to theories across the board.

Recently, Brian McElwee has presented a sophisticated analysis of what exactly it is that makes a problem an overdemandingness objection in the strict sense of the term. We base our analysis on his account, because it applies to both consequentialist and non-consequentialist moral theories. Moreover, his account highlights *demandingness* – how much is demanded and the experience of being subject to extreme demands – as the actual problem. By contrast, other complaints often subsumed under the label "overdemandingness" tend to either be vague or identify multiple problems, not merely the demandingness of a theory itself. For instance, Williams' influential integrity objection condemns the way that moral agents are required to regard themselves and their projects. Williams is not complaining about how much is demanded, because, in his famous Jim case, he concedes that the verdict - that Jim should kill the hostage - is "probably right" (1973, 113). Rather, there is something Williams deems inappropriate about the deliberation process and how it requires an agent to regard themselves.[13]

In McElwee's account, however, it is truly demandingness that is seen as objectionable. According to McElwee:

> *The Pure Demandingness Objection*: "The purported moral considerations in favour of doing A, which genuinely are moral considerations and potentially of sufficient importance to generate a moral obligation, are not outweighed by any moral or non-moral considerations speaking against doing A, but nonetheless are insufficient in context to generate a moral obligation, because the cost to the agent is too great. In other words, doing A is what is morally best, and what is overall best, but is not morally obligatory because the cost to the agent is too great"
>
> (McElwee, 2017, pp. 89–90).

McElwee's account allows us to distinguish overdemandingness from other problems, and to analyze how this problem might or might not affect a number of ethical theories. He proposes four criteria that must be satisfied for an objection to count as a pure overdemandingness objection:

(1) *moral considerations*: There are moral considerations in favor of φ-ing.
(2) *sufficient importance*: The considerations in favor of φ-ing are sufficiently important to generate a moral obligation.
(3) *not outweighed*: The reasons for φ-ing are not outweighed by moral or non-moral reasons to not φ.
(4) *not obligatory*: Because of how much φ-ing costs the agent, φ-ing is not obligatory.

Where φ is some action putatively required by the target moral theory or principle.

According to this conception, a pure overdemandingness objection is one where the excessiveness of the demands is what is fundamentally being objected to. It could be the case that there are no moral considerations in favor of something (failing *moral considerations*), as would be the case with a moral theory which claimed agents must always be jumping, and that any omission of jumping is a moral failing. There is, of course, a sense in which such a theory is too demanding, but the main problem is located elsewhere, namely, in the odd claim that agents must always jump! Given this, such a theory does not face a *pure* overdemandingness objection even though it imposes excessive demands that go beyond what we can reasonably expect of agents. Even if agents loved to jump and did not consider a requirement to jump all the time an imposition, the theory would still be deficient, due to an unreasonable, in fact ludicrous, theory of goods, according to which the one and only good is jumping. It would be a mistake to diagnose the problem with such a theory simply as overdemandingness and try to fix it via mitigating the demandingness of the theory alone, for instance, by proposing a satisficing theory (100 jumps a day are enough, any additional jump is supererogatory).

Moreover, it should be noted that McElwee (2016) himself elsewhere presents a somewhat different version of *not obligatory*, according to which psychological difficulty, rather than costs, can make an action non-obligatory,

even though criteria 1–3 are met.[14] It is not always easy to pull considerations of difficulty apart from those of costs, because it is often difficult for us to motivate ourselves to impose costs on ourselves. Yet, assuming a notion of the grounds of overdemandingness that includes psychological difficulty as well as costs will allow us to apply the conceptual framework of pure overdemandingness to a broader array of cases and ethical theories. We therefore assume that the two proposals are complimentary: *not obligatory* can result from either costs or psychological difficulty.

What a pure overdemandingness objection is becomes perhaps most apparent when we look at consequentialism. For an action to be required on a maximizing consequentialist view, it must simply yield the best (foreseeable) consequences. This can be extremely demanding for an agent, if, for instance, bringing about the best outcome requires that the agent sacrifices their own life to save a number of other lives (or maybe just one). This would certainly be very costly for the agent, and it might also be psychologically difficult. Moreover, we can make the 'moral gain' relatively small, e.g., by stipulating that the best outcome is only *very slightly* better than the outcome if the agent did not sacrifice themselves (e.g., an agent being required to sacrifice their live to save someone who is expected to live a sightly happier life). We might concede that in such cases the *best* thing to do would be to sacrifice oneself, but because this would be such a costly and difficult thing to do, we might think it is not strictly obligatory, for it is too demanding.

Consider how this meets the criteria. We agree that there are *moral considerations* (1) in favor of the action. We agree that saving a person's life is of *sufficient importance* (2) to generate a moral obligation to act. By stipulation, there are *no* moral or non-moral reasons that could *outweigh* (3) the reasons in favor of saving. And yet, it seems (to many of us) that it is *not obligatory* (4) to save someone else at the expense of one's own life and one does not act wrongly if one prioritizes one's own life in these cases.

Before we turn to Kant, let us address one worry someone might have about the very nature of our investigation. The worry is that the criteria we set out do not apply to Kant's framework or at least do not map onto it in a straightforward way, and so perhaps the question as to whether a pure overdemandingness objection can be leveled against Kant is moot. The criteria seem to assume that moral obligations are generated by *moral considerations*, and not a formal principle, such as the Categorical Imperative. Moreover, they assume that reasons to do one's duty can in principle be *outweighed* by non-moral reasons, and that costs to agents can defeat *obligations*. These seem to be non-Kantian assumptions. However, since McElwee's framework seeks to spell out a problem for a theory, it is unsurprising that an advocate of a theory will want to resist the application of this framework to their respective theory, or feel that it might mispresent aspects thereof. Whilst we should not assume that the criteria can be applied schematically and to absolutely all theories, they are valuable for helping us understand whether or not a specific objection can be leveled against a theory. Working out how a theory fares on these criteria will allow us to bring different theories into dialog with each other, and to obtain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of respective theories.

3 | IMPERFECT DUTY AND LATITUDE

Where consequentialist accounts of morality are concerned, the source of (seemingly) excessive moral demands typically arises from a requirement to promote the good or welfare of the globally worst off. Since it is true for all or almost all cases that resources would be, impartially, better allocated aiding the globally worst off, rather than spending on one's own enjoyment, affluent agents would be required to sacrifice all or almost all non-essential goods.[15] Kant's approach differs significantly from this. As we saw, he does not start from (unmet) needs or welfare and impartiality requirements,[16] but from a formal principle, which establishes, amongst other things, obligatory ends, such as beneficence. Moreover, these obligatory ends leave latitude.

The correct understanding of latitude is a hotly debated topic within Kant scholarship.[17] So called *rigorists* maintain that latitude only represents instrumental aspects of the promotion of ends (that you can jump into the

sea yourself to save a drowning person or wave down a lifeguard), that imperfect duties give way for perfect duties (pursuit of obligatory ends is restricted by perfect duty) and that various obligatory ends have to be weighed against each other. Latitude thus does not constitute the freedom to prioritize personal pursuits over imperfect duty.[18] A representative rigorist principle of beneficence is: "If we are able to do an act of the kind prescribed by the imperfect duty of beneficence, then we ought, morally, to do it unless, in the same circumstances, we perform some other act of the kind prescribed by imperfect (or perfect) duties" (Atterton, 2007, p. 136).

By contrast, *latitudinarians*[19] believe that latitude represents the "freedom to choose to do x or not on a given occasion, as one pleases, even though one knows that x is the sort of act that falls under the principle [e.g., of beneficence], provided that one is ready to perform acts of that sort on some other occasions" (Hill, 1992, p. 155). Thus beneficence only requires that we have to help *sometimes* and to *some extent* as long as we are in principle committed to helping others.[20] Latitudinarianism is not merely a position in Kant scholarship but also endorsed as a reading of imperfect duties more widely, e.g., by Greenspan (2010, p. 195) who thinks that it is characteristic of imperfect duties that they leave open "how much is owed".

The overdemandingness problem might disappear, if we admit that we have latitude concerning *what* we do for others, *how much* we do, and *when* we do it. If we exercise our latitude correctly, we will neither do too little nor too much, and thus Kant can overcome the problem of overdemandingness.[21] The concept of latitude promises an appropriately demanding conception of our imperfect duties at least if we can apply our *judgment* correctly in order to decide what is appropriate in particular cases (VI:411). Judgment will identify what to do and how much it is *appropriate* or *reasonable* for an agent to give or do. Because our imperfect duties only require what is appropriate or reasonable of us, by definition, they can never require *too much*, i.e., they can never be overly demanding.

In terms of the framework for pure overdemandingness, latitude can be understood as allowing the agent to identify among the cases of *moral considerations* those that lack *sufficient importance* to translate into obligations. It is thus not the case that there would be moral considerations that are *sufficiently important* (and *not outweighed*) and yet *not obligatory*, because the transition from *moral considerations* to *sufficient importance* is blocked. If this were the case for all imperfect duties, then pure overdemandingness could never occur for imperfect duties.

4 | LATITUDE IS NOT A SILVER BULLET

However, we think this optimism is premature. First of all, a reading of latitude, according to which agents, if they are within the range of their latitude, never do too much or too little might not tell us all that much. Different interpreters have proposed that latitude is compatible with extremely demanding or with much too lenient conceptions of imperfect duty.

Kant himself claims that an agent's "duty at each instant is to do all the good in his power" (VI:72.11), and that to "be beneficent where one can is one's duty" (IV:398.8, see also IV:430). Following these and other remarks Jens Timmermann (2018, n.13) has proposed a very demanding reading of latitude according to which imperfect duties only permit exceptions where they are restricted by perfect duties or "weightier cases falling under the heading of imperfect duty" and where they allow us to "think about the appropriate choice of means". Understood this way, latitude does not permit agents to simply decide not to help. This could result in beneficence requiring us to spend all or almost all of our resources on helping others (as long as this does not violate perfect duties).[22]

Timmermann stresses that you should not do so much for others that you become dependent yourself (VI:454.2–4), that there are indirect duties to preserve your own happiness (IV:399.3-7), and, most importantly, that falling short of maximal beneficence does not necessarily make someone a bad person, as long as they have not adopted non-beneficence on principled grounds (see Timmermann, 2018, sec.4, and 7–8, and Timmermann, 2005, p. 23). Two things are noteworthy about this strategy. One we will focus on this section, the second in the next.

Timmermann draws on the idea that there can be "weightier cases falling under the heading of imperfect duty". This raises the question of what it is that generates this weight. It cannot be different types of contradiction upon universalization of a maxim, as this distinguishes perfect from imperfect duties, and Timmermann has specified that the weightier cases all fall under imperfect duty. One piece of textual support for Timmermann's reading that might illuminate this question is Kant's example of a potential tension within imperfect duty: "a permission to limit one maxim of duty by another (e.g., love of one's neighbor in general by love of one's parents)" (VI:390.11-2).[23] However, Kant here does not explain why obligations to parents are weightier or more important, such that they can limit other obligations, and whether this is always the case. Doing so would be very important for guiding agents' judgments. For instance, we might wonder about cases in which I could either greatly benefit a stranger or benefit my parents only moderately. What Kant needs, it seems, is a rationale for how these maxims can limit each other. This could take the form of a theory of moral weight or of goods that can explain how agents are to adjudicate conflicting considerations that come under imperfect duty, if these judgments are not simply supposed to be a reflection of personal preferences. We will come back to this need for a theory of weight or goods in the second paper. We should highlight here already that such a theory could be an empirical theory of goods, informed by our best psychological and anthropological insights, but it could also be a theory that proceeds from Kantian notions such as agency or humanity and what (external goods) maintaining these capacities requires. It could also be a theory of goods derived from the substantive claims that go into Kant's arguments for establishing obligatory ends in the first place, such as vulnerability and finitude.[24]

The underlying reason that makes it difficult for those who buy into the general outlines of Kant's ethics to escape a very demanding conception even of imperfect duty is insightfully analyzed by Pinheiro Walla (2015, p. 738) as the "*lexical asymmetry problem*". If moral goodness is "infinitely precious", as, for instance, Timmermann (2005, p. 23) puts it, and Kant certainly maintains when he claims that a good will is the only unconditional good (IV:393.5-7), then the question arises: "how can my happiness, which is merely *permitted*, ever compete with what is *morally necessary*? In other words, how can we ever find space for the 'merely permitted', when we could be realizing moral goodness?" (Pinheiro Walla, 2015, p. 738). If we accept two standard Kantian assumptions, the unconditional or supreme value of morality, and that one's own happiness does not have a straightforward moral status, we will almost inevitably be drawn into a conception that struggles to limit what morality can demand of agents. In each case in which I decide against furthering an imperfect duty, my action is difficult to justify, since I had the option to further something of unconditional or infinite value but instead opted for the conditionally good end of finite worth. How could this be rational?

Moreover, we should bear in mind that responses to the overdemandingness problem that draw upon latitude might put the cart before the horse. Latitude and judgment are supposed to guarantee that the demands of imperfect duty are always reasonable or appropriate to the situation. This type of reply implicitly accepts that a moral theory's being overly demanding is a serious complaint. Yet the focus on latitude occludes the rationale for accepting that claim. Those who level overdemandingness objections against Kant can at the very least expect a story about how it is that latitude and judgment allow Kant's conception of imperfect duties to escape this charge and why this does not introduce arbitrariness into his system. After all, there is a substantive debate about how demanding an appropriately demanding ethical theory is. It would thus be more sensible to address the questions as to whether demandingness can be a problem and what the limits of morality (or at least of beneficence) are first. Only once we understand the shape that answers to these questions would take can a conception of latitude do substantive philosophical work.

Finally, in employing the concept of latitude as a response to overdemandingness problems, Kantians tacitly accept that Kant's ethics would be very demanding if it were not for latitude. And, while this might help with imperfect duties, it won't help with perfect duties, which do not admit of latitude.[25]

5 | SYSTEM OF DUTY

As we saw in the previous section, Timmermann thinks that duty can be moderated via additional and substantive assumptions about the significance of personal independence, duties to self and indirect duty and virtue. This is representative of another line of defense for Kantians against the overdemandingness objection. This line of defense can tell us something about both the structure of duty on Kant's framework and tacit assumptions of the overdemandingness objection.

The overdemandingness objection plays out neatly on a consequentialist framework because standard Consequentialism knows only one duty: to promote or maximize the good. Thus, there is a relatively clear divide between impartial moral commands and an agent's self-interest. Whilst Kant sometimes seems to buy into a similar dichotomy, namely, between duty and self-love (V:22.6-8),[26] many Kantians point out that Kant's conception of duty is significantly more nuanced. Kant thinks that happiness can have moral significance as part of the highest good (V:112.28), and there is an indirect duty to preserve happiness in order to ward off temptation (IV:399.3-7). Moreover, Kant believes that we are required to develop our talents (IV:422.37-423.16). Whilst this is a duty, exercising and developing certain talents is something agents typically enjoy, and it might even be essential to a meaningful existence. A number of prominent Kantians therefore suggest that certain Kantian duties "bring a wide range of ordinary human concerns inside morality" (Herman, 2011, p. 100).

It could thus be the case that duty requires us to sacrifice everything that lacks moral status, but this is not a problem, since the most important aspects of what makes our lives go well, do have a *moral* status. According to this conception, duty is self-moderating.[27] Beneficence is limited by the indirect duty to preserve one's own happiness, the imperfect duty to develop one's own talents and a number of special obligations to loved ones (e.g., VI:280.13–22, 422.10–15), and some of these duties give us license to engage in activities that we enjoy and that make our lives worth living. The overdemandingness objection assumes an overly simplistic conception of our duties. On a richer and more accurate conception the problem of overdemandingness might disappear even though duty reigns supreme.

The notion of a system of duties that internally moderates demands, however, has been subject of criticism. Bernard Williams (2006, p. 182) considers this idea as a paradigm of the (in his view) mistaken morality system, according to which only a duty can ever override another duty. Following this criticism van Ackeren and Sticker (2018) maintain that it is counterintuitive that morality could become *less* demanding by adding *more* duties. We will look at a few such examples in the second paper: Sometimes saving a friend or stranger might violate perfect duty and this might make morality overall more demanding.

For the time being, we should bear in mind that even duties to develop certain talents or to support family members are still *duties*. They can be very demanding if someone does not want to develop certain talents or does not in fact enjoy spending time with family members. Duties to self and others therefore moderate demandingness at best contingently (Van Ackeren and Sticker, 2018, sec.5).

It seems that this strategy seeks to maintain what many philosophers consider one of the most problematic aspects of Kant's conception of duties, namely, the very strong primacy that duty enjoys over everything else. In order to mitigate problems and counter-intuitive elements very substantial additional assumptions are required concerning the existence and role of duties to self, indirect duties and special obligations. Whilst Kant, of course, does acknowledge these types of duties, it is not clear that there is a systematically convincing rationale for the existence of these duties. Rather, it seems that further duties are stipulated to get the otherwise limitless demands of duty back under control. Even if all the duties that the system contains are plausible and should be accepted, this only shows that duties are limited by other duties. Whether or not this leads to a level of demandingness that allows us to escape over- (or under-)demandingness objections depends on how different duties are to be weighed against each other or prioritized. The mere idea of a system of duties does not provide instructions for how to weigh different duties against each other.[28] It will emerge as an important problem for Kant in the second paper

that he lacks a proper framework for weighing duties against each other as well as the means and standards to provide an account of how to prioritize between certain (minor) moral goods and non-moral concerns.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the system of duties strategy can only help with overdemandingness as it springs from imperfect duties. After all, on a standard Kantian framework perfect duties are absolute, or at least outweigh other types of duties, and therefore they cannot be moderated by imperfect or indirect duties. This suggests that the most demanding duties on a Kantian framework, and the ones that might be most relevant for the overdemandingness debate, are, in fact, perfect duties. In the second of this pair of papers, we turn to these duties.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The problem that Kant's ethics might demand too little was articulated to Kant himself by Maria von Herbert in a now famous exchange of letters between the two. See Langton (2009, ch.9, esp.211).

[2] Timmermann, unlike Formosa and Sticker (2019), however, thinks that Kant's ethical theory is potentially very demanding.

[3] By 'Consequentialism', we mean impartial hedonistic forms of maximizing act-consequentialism. Modifications of the view, e.g., which are not impartial or maximizing, may not face overdemandingness concerns the same way.

[4] The perfect-imperfect distinction was originally introduced into the German speaking debate by Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694), and the distinction can already be found in Grotius (1583–1645). It has become a prominent conceptual tool in debates about global poverty and global justice (Hope, 2014; O'Neill, 1996; Pogge, 2008).

[5] There is a vast literature on the question of how exactly universalization can generate such contradictions. See, e.g., Allison (2011, ch.7), Kleingeld (2017).

[6] One approach to imperfect duty focuses on the specific features and structures of the ends they are associated with (Fahmy, 2019; Herman, 1991, 2021; Noggle, 2009; Sticker, 2023). Imperfect duties qua ends are not necessarily antagonistic to agents' personal ends, but rather form an important part of a system of ends and duties. We address the idea of a system in sec.5. Noggle (2009) who does not draw on the system idea, argues that we should understand beneficence as one of our *ultimate ends* that give our lives meaning but that agents do not have to promote maximally. However, Kant does not think that obligatory ends have to give someone's life meaning or be constitutive of one's agency. Rational agents do not lose their agency if they abandon obligatory ends, and Kant is generally silent on what gives lives meaning. Moreover, Greenspan (2010) and Herman (2021, ch.7) discuss the role of the state and institutions for moderating imperfect duty and how not all reasons for particular ways of satisfying imperfect duties necessarily translate into requirements. We cannot here pursue these interesting approaches that develop certain Kantian notions.

[7] Apart from perfect and imperfect duties obligatory ends Kant also indicates that ends serve to distinguish between ethical duties and duties of right (VI:239.4-12, 380.19-381.17, 389.12-26), a distinction that elsewhere Kant spells out as a matter of internal and external incentives (VI:218.24-219.11). Moreover, Kant distinguishes between duties to self and others, duties of strict and wide obligation (VI:390.1-91.25), and duties of love and respect (VI:448.10-449.2). Kant's dichotomies, some of which overlap with others, are intricate and cannot be discussed here. In what follows, we focus on the distinction between perfect and imperfect. See O'Neill (1975, ch.4), Denis (2001, ch.2), Ludwig (2013) for further discussion of Kant's dichotomies. For our present purpose it only matters that the duty to adopt the end of beneficence and to further it cannot be externally enforced and thus does not constitute a duty of right. We will look at

perfect duties that are typically duties of omission (and not to further ends) and that can in principle be externally enforced in the second paper.

[8] Similar results can be obtained with regard to the Formula of Humanity (IV:429.10-12). On a standard reading the prohibition against treating persons as a mere means yields perfect duties, the prescription to treat persons as ends yields imperfect ones.

[9] Whilst picking one of these ways is a matter of instrumental rationality, the indeterminacy of imperfect duty means that agents need to find ways to integrate various ways of living up to them into their lives. This adds "*extra demand*s on judgement" (Hope, 2022, p. 64). However, this is not the kind of demandingness that we will be concerned with.

[10] Hope (2014, p. 405) argues that this does not imply that perfect duties are "more fundamental or important than imperfect duties", even though this is a widely shared view. He argues that obligations of an imperfect kind cannot be converted into obligations of a perfect kind, but there is ultimately also more overlap between these types of duties than orthodox Kantianism allows (Hope, 2022).

[11] However, some Kantians explicitly acknowledge duties of *aid* concerned with life and death situations in one's vicinity, and argue that these duties do not come under beneficence (Herman, 1984), or suggest that beneficence itself should be divided into rectificatory assistance to victims who have suffered injustice from others, relational duties to those in one's vicinity and humanitarian beneficence to strangers (Herman, 2021, ch.7.3). Kant himself indicates that some supposed matters of beneficence are better understood as falling under duties of justice (V:155.fn., VI:453.1-33, 454.22-8).

[12] See, for instance, Sticker (2021) for a conception of overdemandingness from Kantian resources specifically devised to assess Kantian imperfect duties to self.

[13] Sometimes Williams' (1981) one-thought-too-many objection is also considered as an overdemandingness objection. However, Smyth (2018, p. 824) has recently plausibly shown that the objection is different in nature and poses a problem for Kant that is different from overdemandingness.

[14] This notion of overdemandingness is also defended by Chappell (2019), who devises a version of consequentialism based on this, which has recently been criticized by Slater (2020, 2024). This view of overdemandingness is denied by Cohen (2000) and van Ackeren (2018).

[15] The standard locus for these types of argument are Singer (1972) and Unger (1996).

[16] Indeed, some of the features of Kantian ethics that account for its appeal are that it is ends or agency focused, not needs based (Herman, 2021, ch.7), is non-maximizing (see, for instance, Herman, 2007, ch.11; Baron, 1995, pp. 88–107, Biss, 2017, p. 627) and that it does not require strict impartiality (Baron, 2016). However, some authors read Kant as a maximizer (Greenspan, 2010, pp. 184–185).

[17] The debate in the literature is partly a reflection of a potential shift between the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the former, Kant leaves open whether imperfect duty admits of exceptions for the sake of inclinations (IV:421. fn.), whereas in the latter he seems to deny this (VI:390.9-14). Timmermann (2007, pp. 79–80) stresses the continuity between these conceptions whereas Atterton (2007) stresses the differences.

[18] Interestingly this position is endorsed by both Kantians who emphatically reject consequentialism (Timmermann, 2005, 2018, 383, Atterton, 2007) and those who want to present Kant as someone who should have endorsed Consequentialism (Cummiskey, 1996).

[19] The term is not ideal since both sides of the debate accept that imperfect duty allows for latitude but disagree about what this means. Indeed, Hope (2022, sec.7) recently argued that even perfect duties may allow for certain forms of latitude.

[20] Hill (1992, pp. 155–157) acknowledges that imperfect *duties of respect* are potentially more stringent than beneficence (VI:449.31-450.2), and human dignity as well as extreme need might give rise to more stringent duties of aid (Hill, 2018, pp. 22–23, see also Hill, 2002, ch.7). Another qualification is that it constitutes "*culpability*" or "*vice*" if an agent makes "it his principle not to comply with" imperfect duty (VI:390.18-29). See Pinheiro Walla (2015), Formosa and Sticker (2019). Baron (1995, ch.3) argues that various imperfect duties allow for different degrees of latitude. Moreover, she stresses that the more demanding duty of moral self-perfection underlies the pursuit of other imperfect duties (ibid.41ff.). She ultimately represents a middle-ground position. See also Hope (2014, sec.2), van Ackeren and Sticker (2018) for other positions that can be understood as constituting a middle-ground.

[21] See for instance Pinheiro Walla (2015, p. 733): "the latitude of imperfect duties can deflect demandingness objections against a Kantian duty of beneficence".

[22] Timmermann, it should be noted, does not think that the demands of duty, even if they are high, are overdemanding in a problematic sense. See also Ashford (2003) who stresses that under certain conditions, morality must be extremely demanding. Moreover, van Ackeren and Sticker (2018) have proposed a reading of beneficence according to which we do not have to do *as much* as we can, but we have to help *every time* we can. Whilst this is less demanding than Timmermann's reading, it might still be overdemanding.

[23] We should note that Kant himself does not explicitly invoke the *weight* of different cases. Moreover, Kant here leaves open whether the tension is internal to beneficence and concerns different ways to be beneficent or between *different* imperfect duties in tension with each other (promote welfare of others vs. to love one's parents), as Atterton (2007, p. 1342) argues. We remain agnostic about whether this is a clash between different obligatory ends or one internal to beneficence.

[24] For instance, Herman (2021, ch.7) argues that agents have to assume certain ends as a condition of their agency and these ends serve as premises in practical deliberation. Sticker (2019) argues that to establish a duty of beneficence in the first place Kant appeals to the fact that agents might find themselves in emergency situations, and they thus cannot will a world of universal non-beneficence. Therefore, (others') emergency has to be a salient factor when promoting the end of beneficence.

[25] On a standard reading perfect duties do not admit of latitude regarding how much they must be obeyed or pursued. They must be obeyed always. There may, however, be latitude regarding certain instrumental matters. It should also be noted that a number of approaches (e.g., Hope, 2014, sec.2, Hope, 2022) treat latitude as a matter of *degree*: perfect duties admit of less latitude, imperfect duties of more.

[26] See Saunders and Sticker (2022) for critical discussion.

[27] Other advocates of this system of duties idea include Timmermann (see previous section), Vogt (2008), Pinheiro Walla (2015, sec. 2), Igneski (2008, p. 239). Herman (2021) has recently developed the notion of a *moral habitat*, "a made environment in which persons can, individually and together, express their nature as free and equal rational beings" (ibid.2) as the guiding idea of a system of duties. She has long occupied a particular place among the champions of a system of duties as she both rejects rigorism but also is not a classic latitudinarian. In many of her papers she develops a nuanced conception of the role of obligatory ends for deliberation and agency. The function of these ends is to "constitute the material final end of human action: that is, they are ends for the sake of which we are to act *and* in light of which other ends are to be chosen" (Herman, 2005, p. 239). They introduce a "deliberative unity" (Herman, 2007, p. 278) for all of our pursuits, including of personal ends as they are the ultimate ends or justification of all actions (Herman, 2007, ch.11). For detailed discussion of this version of the relation between duty (especially obligatory ends) and personal ends see (Sticker, 2023).

[28] Herman (2021, p. 133) recently made it clear that systems of duties might still suffer from a "built-in threat of demandingness [which] could signal a fault". Whether or not the notion of a system of duties is successful depends on the details of the respective system as well as, potentially, on contingent factors, such as the level and urgency of others' needs, your own ends and commitments, and whether institutions are functioning as they should.

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