

# When are collective obligations too demanding<sup>i</sup>

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Talk of collective obligations is ubiquitous in ethical discussions of global problems, in particular global poverty, global (in)justice, and environmental problems. Take three examples: First, when we ask what “we” ought to do about climate change, we often implicitly or explicitly address either states, or humankind as a whole, as obligation-bearers.<sup>ii</sup> Second, duties of beneficence towards the world’s poorest people have at times been understood in terms of collective obligations.<sup>iii</sup> And third, socio-economic human rights have been argued to correspond not to individuals’ duties, but to obligations of states, or even of all of humanity collectively.<sup>iv</sup>

Collective obligations are particularly attractive for understanding the ethical demands created by large-scale and global problems such as poverty and climate change, because an exclusive focus on individual obligations faces serious problems here: An individualistic approach must grapple with the mismatch between the sheer scale of these problems on the one hand, and the limited capacity of individuals to make a positive difference on the other hand. When individuals cannot make a difference, focusing on individual obligations can end up with under-demanding ethical conclusions, namely by not requiring agents to do anything at all. When individuals *can* make a difference, they typically cannot make enough of a difference to remove the need for further positive actions. An individualist ethical perspective then threatens to require agents to give up much of their wealth, welfare, and projects in order to alleviate global problems. The well-known demandingness objection holds that such extensive sacrifices are not in fact morally required, and that ethical views which imply otherwise, such as act consequentialism, are hence mistaken.<sup>v</sup> A promising way to avoid both the over- and under-demandingness problems is to primarily ascribe obligations to alleviate global problems to collectives of people rather than to individuals, because collectives often have many more resources at their disposal than any individual can contribute.

However, collective obligations are not immune to demandingness objections, because collectives, too, have only limited resources. For example, an obligation for a developing

country to immediately forgo all use of fossil fuels is intuitively asking too much. Simon Caney recognises this demandingness concern when he introduces a poverty-sensitive polluter-pays principle for distributing climate burdens, because a pure polluter-pays principle might end up burdening emerging economies to the point of inflicting poverty on some people.<sup>vi</sup> But beyond the occasional recognition of a demandingness concern, we do not yet have a systematic account of how a demandingness objection can arise for supposed collective obligations. In the following, I develop such an account of collective demandingness. This account will help us determine the scope of potential demandingness worries for collective obligations, and will help us assess whether any proposed collective obligation is overly demanding.

### A Working Example

I will be using variations of the following example:

**Updating Chemicals:** Marie and Noël are small-scale farmers on adjacent fields. It has just emerged that the fertilizer they both use harms the environment. They are able to switch to a new fertiliser. However, Marie and Noël must switch together, because if only one of them switches the fertiliser, then the two different chemicals will interact and produce even worse outcomes than the original fertiliser produced on its own.

Suppose that the additional cost of the new fertiliser is zero. Updating Chemicals is then a paradigmatic case in which we may want to ascribe a collective obligation, for the following reasons: Since the two farmers can together make the world better at no cost, something would be morally wrong if they did not do so. But this something cannot be that one of them violates an individual obligation to switch fertilisers. This is because an individual obligation for Marie to switch would hold that were Noël *not* to switch, Marie ought to switch nonetheless (and *vice versa* for Noël).<sup>vii</sup> But acting in this way would be for Marie to ignore that Noël does not play his part, and that her actions therefore will make the world worse rather than better. Such behaviour would be recklessly idealistic, and is hence not morally required. So we may instead hold that it is Noël and Marie *together* who ought to switch, and thus propose the collective obligation “{Marie and Noël} ought to update their fertilizer.”

Affirming this collective obligation is an attractive way of capturing the intuition that something is wrong if Marie and Noël fail to switch fertilizers, as it avoids difficulties faced by individual obligations.<sup>viii</sup> But this supposed could still be subject to another problem, namely the demandingness objection: Consider a spectrum of variations of Updating Chemicals in which the cost of switching fertilizers increases. At some point, this cost will be

so high that a putative collective obligation for Marie and Noël to switch fertilisers is intuitively asking too much. Henceforth, assume that the cost is at least that high, so that this collective obligation is intuitively overly demanding. The task of the following argument is to spell out how, precisely, this demandingness objection to a collective obligation works, in order to then apply this understanding to more complex cases.

### Preliminary Remarks

Some preliminary considerations are needed before we can analyse the collective demandingness objection in more detail.

First, we may want to ascribe collective obligations both to organised, structured collectives, such as states, corporations, international organisations, and to unstructured collectives or mere aggregates of agents, such as all rich people, humankind together, or the international community.<sup>ix</sup> Updating Chemicals features a mere aggregate of agents, so most of my discussion will assume unstructured collectives. I will then translate my findings to supposed collective obligations of structured collectives later in the discussion.

Second, I remain agnostic about whether collective obligations require genuinely collective actions, or can also require loose and potentially uncoordinated sets of actions. These latter sets of agent-action consist in “collective patterns of actions”, such as {Marie: update fertilizer; Noël: keep old fertilizer}. But note that genuinely collective actions also at least partly consist in such collective patterns of actions as well, because whatever a collective does, it always requires that the collective’s members enact some collective pattern of actions. So by focusing on the demandingness of obligations that require collective patterns of actions, I provide an account of sufficient conditions for the demandingness objection to apply both to obligations that require loose action-sets and to obligations that require genuinely collective actions.

Third, if we accept over-demandingness as a reason to reject supposed obligations, as I do in this paper, then by definition there cannot be any over-demanding collective obligations, only over-demanding supposed collective obligations.<sup>x</sup> For ease of expression, I henceforth use “obligations” to also include “supposed obligations.”

Lastly, a supposed moral obligation for a collective to do something can face two distinct demandingness objections: First, one may object that if the collective were to discharge its collective obligation, then this would lead to overly high cost *for the collective's members*. Since *collective* demandingness here boils down to a concern about cost to

*individuals*, I call this objection the “reductive demandingness objection”. Second, one may object that if the collective were to discharge the collective obligation, then this would lead to overly high cost *for the collective qua collective*. I call this objection the “irreducible demandingness objection”.

I here focus on the reductive demandingness objection, as it poses the more serious threat to supposed collective obligations, for two reasons: First, the irreducible demandingness objection can only apply to obligations of structured collectives, as unstructured collectives do not constitute a distinct collective agent or entity about whose well-being (if any) we could be morally concerned. The reductive demandingness objection, by contrast, can apply to the obligations of all kinds of collectives, and is hence a more general concern. Second, even if we only consider the obligations of structured collectives, the irreducible demandingness objection must rely on the contentious idea that it matters, morally speaking, how well the supposedly obliged collective does, irrespective of what this means for how well its individual members are doing.<sup>xi</sup> This contentious assumption makes the irreducible demandingness objection vulnerable to a quick refutation by merely rejecting this assumption. The reductive demandingness objection, by contrast, does not share this vulnerability, and instead focuses on an uncontroversial object of concern: the well-being of the collective’s individual members.

### The Nature of Demandingness

In *Updating Chemicals*, a collective obligation for Marie and Noël to update their fertilisers is intuitively overly demanding, and it is so because of the cost that discharging this obligation involves for each of them. At first sight, this objection is straightforward. However, once we consider how the demandingness objection works in general, we can see that some more work is needed for spelling out such the reductive collective demandingness objection.

What is it that we object to when we say that a supposed obligation is too demanding? When we raise this objection, we are saying that discharging the obligation comes at a cost that is too high. But not just any old cost. To see this point, consider the following example:

**The Pension:** Peter’s older friend Robin is about to retire. Robin will receive a basic state pension, which on its own is enough to just get by. But Robin will also receive a large lump sum payment from his private pension fund, with which he can afford his retirement plan to frequently travel to see his grandchildren and to take the occasional holiday trip.

Now consider three putative obligations, all of which involve the same cost to Robin, but only

one of which is overly demanding. First, consider the supposed obligation “Peter ought to pressure Robin to take the lump sum payment and donate the money to an effective aid charity.” Discharging this supposed obligation leads to Robin foregoing his retirement plans. Yet among all that is wrong with this supposed obligation, over-demandingness is not among these problems. After all, for all we know, it may be very easy for Peter to pressure Robin, and it is *this* action that the obligation requires.

Second, suppose that Peter has promised another friend that he will donate a large amount of money to an effective aid charity. But the only way that Peter can come by this money is for Robin to take the lump sum payment and to give the money to Peter. Now consider the supposed obligation “*Peter* ought to donate a large sum of money”. Discharging this obligation practically requires that Robin gives up his pension fund and hence incur a very high cost. But this cost is not the right kind of cost to threaten to make Peter’s obligation too demanding. This is because this cost, while factually necessary, is not morally required: Peter’s obligation leaves Robin at liberty to spend his pension on whatever pleasures he wants.

Third, consider the supposed obligation “Robin ought to take the lump sum and donate the money to charity.” Here, at last, we could raise a genuine demandingness objection: Robin’s sacrifice, while laudable, is simply too costly to be morally required.

The lesson of the comparison of the above three obligations is, as Brian McElwee has pointed out, that the demandingness objection is specifically about the cost that a supposed obligation *requires the addressed or obligated agent to impose on herself*.<sup>xiii</sup> A proponent of an obligation to self-impose an overly high cost thus fails to appreciate the special reason provided by this cost, due to which no such obligation does obtain.

What is this “special reason”? To answer this question, consider that the proponent of the costly obligation may well have considered the cost to the agent in *some* way: In our example, she may have weighed the loss of Robin’s retirement pleasures against the benefits that his money can create in the hands of an effective aid charity. She will then have found that the cost to Robin’s welfare is less than the gain to aid recipients’ welfare, and is thus worth it. The cost to Robin is then a relevant consideration for evaluating both the supposed obligations for Peter to pressure Robin, and for Robin to give away the money.

But the proponent of an obligation for Robin to give away his pension overlooks, though, is that the cost to Robin plays a *further* role for determining *Robin’s own* obligations. For Robin’s obligations, cost to Robin’s welfare matters not only with in the overall cost-benefit evaluation of the different options available to him. Instead, this cost, if overly high,

can also give Robin a moral permission to not perform actions which, in terms of overall cost and benefit, bring about superior outcomes. Cost to an agent is thus an agent-relative reason which can generate moral permissions for that agent to act suboptimally, and the proponent of an overly demanding obligation overlooks this reason.

### Collective Obligations and Demands on Individuals

As we have seen, the demandingness objection to some putative obligation is specifically about the cost that the obligation requires the agent to impose upon herself. When we consider raising this objection to a *collective* obligation on grounds of cost to *individual members* of the collective, we then need to explain how this specific kind of cost applies here.

To see why this is a challenge, consider again the obligation for Marie and Noël to update their fertilizers. For this obligation *of the collective* to be discharged, Marie needs to incur extremely high cost, and so does Noël. But the cost-bearers are here the individuals, while the obligation-bearer is the collective. This situation resembles the case where Peter ought to give money he promised to give, which he can only do if Robin gives him the money. Yet in that case, the cost to Robin did not lead to a demandingness objection against the obligation, because Robin was not required to incur this cost. So likewise, an obligation for {Marie and Noël} cannot be overly demanding just because discharging it *practically* requires that Marie, as well as Noël, each incur very high cost. Instead, for there to be a demandingness objection against Marie and Noël's collective obligation, the collective obligation must also *morally* require each of them individually to incur this cost.

Since the collective obligation itself is directed only at the collective of {Marie and Noël}, any further requirements on them individually must come in the form of further individual obligations that are *implied by* the collective obligation. The collective obligation then, mediated via these implied obligations, also requires this same cost.

But what individual obligations does the collective obligation imply for each of the farmers individually? After all, we have already seen that individual obligations for Marie and Noël to switch fertilisers are implausible, because under partial compliance, these obligations require agents to act recklessly idealistically and to thereby make the world worse. To avoid this recklessness problem, we can instead propose that the farmers have *conditional participatory obligations*, namely “If Noël plays his part, or would play his part if Marie plays hers, then Marie ought to play her part as well” and “If Marie plays her part, or would play her part if Noël plays his,<sup>xiii</sup> then Noël ought to play his part as well.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Why should a proponent of the collective obligation hold that these conditional

participatory obligations are implied by the collective obligation? After all, such implied obligations are precisely absent in the case of Peter and Robin: Peter's obligation to give money does not in any way oblige Robin to give him the money. Why would Marie and Noël's collective obligation be any different?

The answer to this question has to do with the action-guidingness of moral obligations. Consider again a supposed moral obligation for Peter to give away the money he doesn't yet have. That this action is morally required is not just any odd descriptive fact about the action, such as a fact about how long the action will take. Instead, the obligation aims to guide Peter's actions so that he acts as he ought. In other words, the obligation aims to exert a non-optional "pull" on Peter's deliberations towards giving away the money. And even though Peter cannot give away the money he doesn't have, he can still do something in response to the obligation, e.g. ask Robin to give him the money, or apologise to the person to whom he has made to promise.

Now consider the collective obligation for Marie and Noël to switch fertilizers. In contrast to Peter's situation, if Marie and Noël do not do anything, then there is absolutely *nothing* additional that the collective {Marie and Noël} can do in response to the obligation, because collectives cannot act *at all* if their members do not enact some collective pattern of actions. This is because these patterns constitute the actions of the collective in the first place, as opposed to merely facilitating them, as in the case of Peter's action of giving away money he doesn't yet have. So in contrast to Peter's obligation, which can be action-guiding without requiring anything of Robin, Marie and Noël's collective obligation can only guide what the collective {Marie and Noël} does by guiding what the agents individually do.

Now Marie and Noël might just like the idea of their collective acting as it ought, and the collective obligation would therefore guide their actions. But this link between members and the collective obligation is too weak for robust, non-optional action-guidingness that is the hallmark of an obligation. The collective obligation exerts a non-optional deliberative pull only if it implies individual *obligations* for Marie and Noël to perform actions which lead to the collective acting as it ought. At minimum, these obligations must include obligations to not stand in the way of the collective discharging its obligation, i.e. to play one's part if the other agent plays theirs. Thus Marie and Noël must have the above conditional participatory obligations.<sup>xv</sup>

Note that if Marie and Noël both will not play their part no matter what the other does, then both of their conditional participatory obligations are discharged, even though the collective obligation is not discharged. So conditional participatory obligations are not enough



to robustly guide a collective towards fulfilling its collective obligations, and some further implied obligations are needed. For example, Marie and Noël may be required to also stand ready to participate in the required collective pattern of actions.<sup>xvi</sup> In general, a collective obligation must imply enough individual obligations so that if all obliged individuals act as they ought, then the collective obligation gets discharged.

While any such further implied individual obligations can raise demandingness worries, I here set these aside and focus on conditional participatory obligations. This is because the content of any further obligations may vary from case to case, and also depends on the collective's structure. Furthermore, the cost of discharging these further obligations (e.g. to initiate a collective pattern of actions) may often be hard to determine. Conditional participatory obligations, by contrast, are always implied, and if we have a clear picture of what the collective obligation requires, then we also have a sufficiently good idea of the cost of each individual playing her part.

### The Demandingness of Conditional Obligations

Collective participatory obligations imply conditional participatory obligations of each member of the obliged collective. Insofar as these implied individual obligations are too demanding, the collective obligation is then reductively overly demanding as well. But how precisely are *conditional* obligations too demanding? To see why this question poses a puzzle, suppose that Noël, stuck in his old ways, will definitely not change his fertiliser. Now consider the supposed collective obligation for Noël and Marie to change fertilisers, and its implied conditional participatory obligation for Marie to change to the expensive fertiliser if Noël changes as well. This conditional participatory obligation is in practice not asking anything of Marie, as its condition is not going to get triggered. So how can it be too demanding?

One possible response to this question is to hold that such conditional obligations are actually not too demanding. More generally, the idea is that the demandingness of a conditional obligation depends not just on the costliness of the supposedly required action, but also on the likelihood that the conditions for this requirement to be relevant become actualised. This position is endorsed by Fiona Woollard.<sup>xvii</sup>

Whatever the merits of this position in the mainstream demandingness discussion, which is focused on moral theories of individual moral obligations, I argue that we should not take this position here, because it has problematic implications for the demandingness of collective obligations, and there is a plausible way of conceiving of the demandingness of a



conditional obligation independently from the likelihood of its condition ever getting triggered.

First, suppose that the demandingness of a conditional obligation depends also on how likely it is that its condition gets triggered. Consider this assumption in the context of Updating Chemicals: The likelihood that Marie's conditional participatory obligation gets triggered is the likelihood that Noël will play his part and change fertilizers. If Noël will play his part, then Marie's conditional participatory obligation would be overly demanding, if he will not play his part, then it would not. The same follows for the reductive demandingness of the collective obligation.

Now note further that the likelihood Noël plays his part also in part determines the likelihood that the collective will act as it ought: If he will not play his part, then this likelihood is zero, and if he will play his part, then this likelihood is up to Marie. So both the demandingness of the collective obligation for Marie and Noël, and the likelihood of this obligation being discharged, are in part determined by what Noël in fact does. And through this common factor, the demandingness of the collective obligation then correlates with the likelihood that this obligation it will be discharged.

It is this final correlation that is problematic, because whether any supposed obligation is overly demanding must be independent from the likelihood that the obligated agent or agents will in fact act as the obligation requires. The reason for this requirement on collective demandingness is that demandingness poses constraints on what agents can be morally required to do, and what agents are morally required to do is independent of and categorically distinct from what they in fact do in the very same choice situation. Hence what agents in fact do must not bear on the demandingness of obligations of these agents. Since there is no reason why this theoretical requirement should not hold for the demandingness of collective obligations, it follows that the demandingness of a conditional obligation cannot depend on the likelihood that the obligation's condition gets triggered.

Second, we can plausibly understand the demandingness of conditional obligations independently from the likelihood that these obligations get triggered: Assume that a unconditional obligation for Marie to change fertilisers at very high cost to herself would be asking too much. From the above discussion of the nature of demandingness, we know that a proponent of this obligation makes a specific mistake: She fails to appreciate the agent-relative reason generated by the overly high cost to Marie. This reason generates a moral permission for Marie to not self-impose such cost.

Now the same mistake is made by the proponent of a conditional obligation for Marie to

change fertilisers if Noël does: She holds that there is some situation – Noël changing his fertiliser – in which the balance of reasons is such that the damage to the environment outweighs the cost to Marie, so that Marie then ought to incur the very high cost of changing fertilisers. But if we assume that the unconditional obligation is too demanding, then the balance of reasons does not work out this way. The proponent of the conditional participatory obligation has thus overlooked that in any situation, Marie has agent-relative reasons that permits her to not incur extremely high cost. Whether the situation is exceedingly rare, unexpected, or predicted to never occur is of no concern here – the mistake about the reasons agents have is the same as with over-demanding unconditional obligations. So a conditional obligation to incur some cost is just as overly demanding as an unconditional obligation to incur the same cost.

### Explaining Reductive Collective Demandingness

We now have all pieces available to show how cost to Marie and Noël as individuals makes a collective obligation for them to update fertilisers too demanding. The collective obligation implies conditional obligations for each of them individually to update the fertilizer if the other person will do likewise. These conditional participatory obligations are just as over-demanding as an unconditional obligation to incur this cost. So the collective obligation is likewise overly demanding.

One concern with this explanation of the demandingness of Marie and Noël's supposed collective obligation is that while the collective obligation implies the overly demanding conditional participatory obligations, this does not mean that every property of the latter, e.g. over-demandingness, is also a property of the collective obligation.

One response to this worry is to insist that when an obligation implies another obligation, the actions that the implied obligation requires thereby also belong to the actions required by the implying obligation. But if this response is found unsatisfactory, then we can also understand reductive demandingness without having to make this assumption: Due to the practicality requirement on any obligation, and the fact that collectives can only act through their members, a collective obligation always implies some conditional participatory obligations for the obliged collective's members. But if the actions that are conditionally required by these latter obligations are overly costly, then they are in fact not required. By *modus tollens*, it then follows that the supposed collective obligation also does not obtain. Since this rejection of the collective obligation is based on the cost that the collective's members incur if the collective discharges the obligation, we here have a reductive

demandingness objection to the collective obligation.

### Reductive Collective Demandingness and Multiple Implementations

So far, we have reductively accounted for the demandingness of the collective obligation in *Updating Chemicals*, where only one collective pattern of actions performed by Marie and Noël discharges their obligation to together update their fertilisers. However, most collective obligations advanced in the philosophical literature can be discharged in multiple different ways: For example, “provide the means of subsistence to the global poor” or “reduce carbon emissions by 80%” can be achieved in various ways which distribute cost differently. So we need to generalise the above discussion of reductive demandingness to also cover these more paradigmatic proposals of collective obligations. For this purpose, consider the following modified example:

**Unmixing Chemicals:** Marie and Noël are small-scale farmers on adjacent fields, and use different fertilisers. It has just turned out that due to the close proximity of the fields, the two fertilizers mix and thereby create a new chemical compound that is harmful to the environment. In order to avoid this harm, the two farmers need to use the same fertiliser, and it does not matter which fertiliser that is. Marie uses an older, cheaper, product, while Noël uses a more modern, and significantly more expensive, fertilizer. It would be moderately inconvenient for Noël to switch to the older product, but for Marie, switching to the newer product would be ruinously expensive.

Now consider the supposed collective obligation “{Marie and Noël} ought to use the same fertiliser.” Is this obligation too demanding? Intuitively, it is not, as there is a way for Marie and Noël to discharge this obligation without either of them incurring overly high cost: They can both switch to the older, less expensive, fertiliser. To square this intuition with the above discussion of conditional participatory obligations, we need to argue that Marie does not have a conditional participatory obligation to switch to the expensive fertilizer if Noël sticks to using this product, but that this lack of a conditional participatory obligation is no problem for the action-guidingness of the collective obligation.

Here is how to go about this argument: First, we can deny a conditional participatory obligation for Marie to use the expensive fertiliser because the high cost provides her with an agent-relative reason which permits her to not act in a way that avoids the harm caused by the mixed chemicals. So in the situation where Noël sticks to the expensive fertiliser, Marie is permitted to frustrate the enactment of a collective pattern of actions in which they both use

the same fertiliser.

Second, suppose that Marie makes use of this permission, and sticks to her old fertiliser. Now crucial for the action-guidingness of the collective obligation, due to the low switching cost for Noël, he is then *not* likewise permitted to stick to the new fertiliser and to thereby obstruct the collective pattern of actions in which they both use the cheaper fertiliser. So it is not possible for the collective obligation to be violated while both of the individual agents act rightly. This means that the collective obligation retains its action-guiding force, even though excessive cost to an agent has led us to deny one conditional participatory obligation to complete one of the ways in which the obligation can be discharged.

A supposed collective obligation would lose its action-guiding force (and thus not actually be an obligation) only if *each* of the possible implementations of the required action may permissibly be frustrated by some member. If this permission is due to excessive cost of these members' part in these implementations, then we have a demandingness objection to the supposed collective obligation.

We can now formulate the following general reductive condition for collective demandingness:

**Reductive Condition for Collective Demandingness:** A supposed collective obligation to perform some action is reductively too demanding if for all of the implementations of that action, the part played by at least one of the collective's members is so costly that an individual moral obligation to play this part would be overly demanding.

Note that the reductive condition is a *sufficient* condition for collective demandingness. As mentioned above, perhaps some collective obligations imply overly demanding individual obligations not just to play one's part, but also to initiate coordination or stand ready to coordinate. But the high cost on these actions typically arise due to non-ideal circumstances where other members of the collective do not cooperate. As I discuss below, cost which the collective can avoid are not relevant for the demandingness objection, and I therefore do not investigate these costs any further.

#### Reductive Collective Demandingness and Non-ideal External Constraints

Until now, we have looked at Marie and Noël in isolation from the rest of humankind. To further approximate paradigmatic real-world cases of supposed collective obligations, consider the following modification of the example, which now includes a wider social context:

**Selling Chemicals:** The situation is as Unmixing Chemicals. But the chemicals are provided by the same dealer, who gains most of her profits from selling the more expensive chemical. The dealer therefore makes clear that she would not provide the old product if Noël were to request it. There is no other dealer to whom Noël could turn.

The trader here closes off one of the possible ways for Marie and Noël to avoid mixing chemicals, and only leaves them with the expensive option. Is a supposed collective obligation for Marie and Noël to use the same fertiliser now too demanding? I think it is, for the same reasons as in the above discussion of the initial case of Updating Chemicals: The collective obligation can now only be discharged if Marie incurs overly high cost. Nothing in the above discussion traded on a particular explanation of why switching fertilisers might become overly expensive. This position is also in line with how the demandingness objection is discussed in the philosophical literature, where demandingness worries often arise out of an application of a moral theory to a non-ideal situation of partial compliance with the demands of morality.<sup>xviii</sup>

#### Reductive Collective Demandingness and Increasing the Size of Collectives

When can, however, disregard the non-ideal behaviour of the chemicals dealer if we ask not what {Marie and Noël} collectively ought to do, but what the larger collective {Marie, Noël, and the chemicals dealer} collectively ought to do. This is because when we ask what a given agent ought to do in a given choice situation, we must necessarily set aside facts about what she will *actually do in this very situation*. Put differently, whether or not you will do something has no bearing on whether or not you ought to perform that very action. Since what the chemicals dealer does in part determines what the collective of all three agents does, we must set aside any predictions about her behaviour when we determine what the collective ought to do. We then need to consider *all* the *possible* ways in which the collective could act, out of which three collective patterns of actions avoid the harm caused by the mixed chemicals: First, the dealer provides the new fertiliser at the high price, and Marie and Noël both use it. Second, the dealer provides enough the old fertiliser to both Marie and Noël, who then both use it. And third, if economically possible, the dealer provides the new fertiliser to Marie at a lower price, and Marie and Noël then use this chemical.

A collective obligation for {Marie, Noël, and the dealer} to avoid the harm caused by mixing chemicals is then not overly demanding, for the same reasons that applied in Unmixing Chemicals: If Marie, morally optionally, opts for the newer fertilizer, then the all is

well and the collective obligation is discharged. But if she makes use of her permission to not incur this cost and sticks to the old fertiliser, then Noël and the dealer ought to play their part in the collective pattern of actions in which all parties opt for the old fertiliser.<sup>xix</sup> The reductive condition for collective demandingness is then accordingly not triggered, as there are possible implementations of the required action in which no individual member bears an overly high cost.

Generalising beyond our example, we get the following result for the scope of reductive demandingness worries: The larger the addressed collective, the fewer the reductive demandingness worries we face. This result follows not just because larger collectives have, in absolute terms, more resources at their disposal. Instead, obligations of larger collectives are less prone to the demandingness objection also because these obligations ignore or screen off non-ideal behaviour of agents which increase the cost to other agents. The larger the collective whose obligations we are considering, the more these two mechanisms together reduce the threat of demandingness.

#### Application of the Reductive Account of Collective Demandingness

We can now draw some lessons for using collective obligation in the ethics of large-scale moral problems. First, when we keep increasing the size of obliged collectives to the extreme, we include all agents in the obliged collective, and address humankind as a whole. In this situation, any non-ideal actions that might make discharging a global collective obligation very costly for some individuals are then screened off. To evaluate whether such a global collective obligation is overly demanding, we then only need to consider which cost will *unavoidably* follow from discharging the obligation, and need not consider what cost will actually follow. For example, a global collective obligation to invest as many resources as possible in space colonisation might well be too demanding, because even if everyone acts ideally well, there is no way of discharging this obligation without individuals incurring extremely high cost. By contrast, an obligation to alleviate all of global poverty can be discharged in ways that are not overly costly for any individual.

Second, once we consider the obligations of sub-global collectives, matters get more complicated. Some agents then fall outside of the collective whose actions we are evaluating, and these agents can behave in non-ideal ways that increase the cost that some of the collective's members must incur for the collective obligation to be discharged. As argued above, we need to take these increased costs at face value. We then need to ask which cost will *unavoidably follow given the non-ideal actions of outside agents*. The more we restrict

the size of the evaluated collective, the more other agents' actions we need to consider as potential influences on the cost that is involved in discharging a collective obligation, and which the obliged collective cannot avoid.

This finding is significant, because even wealthy and powerful states face competitive pressures exercised by other states, which can increase the cost involved in discharging collective obligations. For example, investments in cleaner energies, transition to a low-carbon economy, and stricter environmental protections can, at least in the short term, lead to competitive disadvantages in the global economy. These disadvantages might then, for example, lead to increased unemployment or reduced wages particularly for low-skilled workers. These are just conjectures, testing which will require empirical data and economic analysis. The general point, though, is that such further investigations are necessary for determining whether a supposed collective obligation of a sub-global collective is reductively overly demanding.

That said, when we determine whether a supposed obligation is overly demanding, we must pay heed to not illicitly take into account non-ideal facts about what members of the obliged collective will in fact do. For example, when we say, for example, that an obligation for a state to quickly phase out coal power is overly costly for coal miners, we implicitly assume that all that happens in the economy is the phasing out of coal power, and that all other aspects remain constant. Such a disruptive transition would in fact be very, and perhaps overly, costly for coal miners. But an obligation to phase out coal power can be discharged in different ways, some of which would pair the phasing out with other measures which support coal miners in finding work elsewhere and which distribute the cost of the transition more equitably across society. So an obligation to quickly phase out coal power does not *require* an overly high cost for coal miners, and therefore does not face a demandingness objection. To generalise this point, when we evaluate whether some cost will *unavoidably* follow from discharging a collective obligation, we need to be creative in envisaging a broad range of possible implementations of a required collective action.

Note that even though the predicted but avoidable cost of discharging a supposed collective obligation does not create a demandingness objection, we can still draw on these costs to reject the collective obligation on different grounds. For example, when we evaluate whether a country ought to quickly phase out coal power, we can ask this evaluative question under the proviso "given that there are not going to be welfare transfers and other support for coal miners". We may then want to deny an obligation to phase out coal power, because it would in fact be discharged in a non-ideal and non-obligatory way that is overly burdensome



on coal miners. Likewise, we may also refrain from politically *advocating* a quick transition from coal power, if we know that it will in fact be implemented in a way that is overly burdensome on some people. But in both cases, we are not raising a demandingness objection to a supposed obligation, as the overly high cost is not *required* by an obligation to phase out coal power. Instead, the reason is an actualist and non-ideal theory concern with actual outcomes of some actions given how obliged agents will actually act.<sup>xx</sup>

### Reductive Demandingness and Highly Structured Collectives

In the above discussion of the Reductive Condition for collective demandingness, I relied on the idea that a collective obligation implies that for at least one collective pattern of actions that discharges the collective obligation, *all* members of the collective have conditional participatory obligations to play their part if others play theirs. If it turns out that for all possible implementations of a supposedly required collective action, some individuals must bear an overly high cost, then it follows that the collective obligation implies at least one overly costly conditional participatory obligation and is hence overly demanding.

When we consider unstructured collectives like {Marie and Noël}, universal conditional participatory obligations are plausible: In the absence of any specific roles within the collective, discharging that collective obligation is the concern of every member of the collective. But how about more structured collectives? Is it possible that for highly structured collectives, collective obligations imply individual obligations only for some, but not for other, members? To answer this question, consider the following example:

**Business Payments:** A company has ordered materials from a supplier, and now owes the supplier money. The company makes payments through the accountant issuing an order, and the director authorising the payment. The mechanic who services the factory machines has no role to play in that process.

Suppose that the company ought to pay its supplier. This obligation would lack action-guiding force if it didn't imply obligations for the accountant and director to play their part in sending the money. But no action is required of the mechanic. So on grounds of the practicality of obligations, we can so far only stipulate conditional participatory obligations for the accountant and director.

So far, so good. But now add a further twist to the example:

**Hard Business Payments:** If the company makes the payment, then it will have to lay off the mechanic, who cannot readily find a new job.

Now suppose, still, that the company ought to pay its supplier. Again, it seems that we need

not stipulate any conditional participatory obligations for the mechanic for this obligation to be action-guiding, as she is not needed in the process. But intuitively, this collective obligation is a good candidate for being too demanding on grounds of the cost to the mechanic. This raises a problem, because the demandingness objection applies only if individual who ends up bearing the high cost is in some way required to inflict the cost on herself.

We can now take one of two approaches: First, we can deny that the obligation for the company to pay its supplier is too demanding. We can hold that it is simply a case of requiring cost to be imposed on someone else, namely the mechanic, just as the supposed obligation for Peter to pressure Robin to give away his pension savings. For this response to work, we understand the collective obligation for the company to pay the supplier and lay off the mechanic to be addressed not at the company as a whole, but only at the accountant, and director. *They* collectively ought to see to it that the company pays the supplier, and doing so happens to negatively affect the mechanic as a third party.

This approach is not promising. Not only does it commit us to revisionistically unravelling many collective obligations that are intuitively unproblematic, but it also undermines explanations for why the supposed obligations of the sub-collectives obtain. In our example, this approach leaves unexplained why the accountant and director collectively ought to act. This is because the company may well have incurred its financial obligations due to the actions of *other* members of the company. The two officers then ought to act precisely because, through the actions of other officers, the company has incurred an obligation to pay. If we leave the collective obligations of the company as a whole out of the picture, we end up with the actions of some (sub-)collectives mysteriously bringing about obligations for other (sub-)collectives.

The second approach is to hold that the company's collective obligation does, after all, address all of its members, including the mechanic, and therefore does *require* the overly high cost of the mechanic and is thus too demanding. This approach is attractive, as it is in line with how the company could object to the obligation: It is simply too costly "for us", because "one of us" will end up jobless. But for this to be a proper demandingness objection, the collective obligation must imply a conditional participatory obligation for the mechanic, contrary to the initial appearance that it does not.

We can defend this position by pointing out that many conditional participatory obligations rarely become relevant, or are trivially easily discharged, so that we typically ignore them. For an example of such hidden implied conditional participatory obligations,

consider again the first case of Business Payments: The mechanic can probably do some things to frustrate the payment of the supplier, if she really goes out of her way. She could, for example, try to intercept the internal mail and make the payment order disappear. Suppose that she could successfully do that. If the collective obligation for the company to pay its bills did not address the mechanic at all, then this obligation would leave it morally permissible for the mechanic to frustrate the payment. But then the collective obligation would not be robustly action-guiding: It would be possible for all individuals to act as the collective obligation requires them to act, while the collective obligation itself is not discharged. To preserve action-guidingness, we must thus accept that a collective obligation for the company implies conditional participatory obligations on *all* of its members to not frustrate what the company is required to do. For pragmatic reasons, we often simply ignore many of the collective's members, because their frustrating the discharging of the collective obligation is not a salient possibility.

Now these implied conditional obligations for *all* members means that in Hard Business Payments, the mechanic ought not to frustrate the payment if all other officers play their part, if she had this opportunity. Given the above considerations about the demandingness of conditional obligations, this obligation, no matter how unlikely it is that the opportunity arises, can be charged with being overly demanding. So the collective obligation which implies this obligation is overly demanding as well.

Lastly, stipulating these universal and often implicit conditional participatory obligations is less plausible when we consider collectives with alienated or oppressed members. For example, must a disenfranchised minority in a state really support, or not frustrate, debt repayments that come at a significant cost to themselves? Perhaps not. But in these cases, the first approach discussed above is more promising: We can deny that these collectives as a whole have the obligations in question, and understand these obligations as addressed only at some sub-groups of the collective. For example, the obligation to repay the debt would then only be addressed at those in power who have decided to incur the debt in the first place, or at those who have benefited from it.

So in summary, with the aid of largely implicit and minimal, but universal, conditional participatory obligations, we can account for the demandingness of many collective obligations of highly structured collectives the same way we can treat unstructured collectives. In other cases, we can be revisionist about the supposed collective obligation and restrict their addressees to only a sub-group of the apparently addressed collective.

## Conclusion

Collective obligations are popular in moral and political philosophy, in particular for accounting for our obligations with regard to large-scale and global problems that are too large to be tackled by individuals on their own. One attraction of collective obligations is that they seem to be well suited for avoiding the demandingness objection that plagues individualistic ethical approaches in such cases. In the present paper, I have examined how and when demandingness might still create a problem for proponents of collective obligations. I have developed a reductive condition for when a supposed collective obligation is too demanding on grounds of cost involved for individual members of the obliged collective.

The upshot of my argument is that while there is a potential for demandingness objections to supposed collective obligations, the outlook for collective obligations is overall positive. The worry that a collective obligation might end up being overly onerous particularly on the obliged collective's worst-off members can be set aside as long as there is *some* way to discharge the collective obligation without imposing these undue burdens. What proponents of collective obligations must pay particular attention to are costs that arise due to the actions of agents outside of the supposedly obliged collective, and costs which cannot be avoided if the supposed collective obligation is to be discharged. It is these costs that support a demandingness objection to collective obligations, so we must be particularly attentive to these costs when we propose collective obligations to do something about large-scale moral problems.

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ii E.g. Caney, “Just Emissions”, p. 257.

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- iii E.g. Green, “Distance, Divided Responsibility and Universalizability”.
- iv Wringer, “Global Obligations”; Wringer, “Needs, Rights, and Collective Obligations”.
- v See e.g. Sobel. “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection”, p.3; Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism*, p. 4; Murphy, “Help and Beneficence”; and McNaughton. “Consequentialism”.
- vi Caney, “Climate change and the duties of the advantaged”, 212f., 218.
- vii I often leave the *vice versa* addition implicit.
- viii For problems with this approach, see Pinkert, “What If I Cannot Make a Difference (and Know It)”, p. 98. For the purposes of the present argument, it does not matter whether ascribing a collective obligation here is the only or best way of accommodating the intuitions about wrongdoing if Marie and Noël together fail to switch fertilizers, as I here focus on over-demandingness rather than under-demandingness.
- ix Whether we can *correctly* ascribe obligations to mere aggregates of agents is highly contested, and while I believe that we can correctly ascribe such obligations, I here do not mean to simply presuppose this position. Readers who are sceptical of such obligations can still ask “supposing, for the sake of argument, that other concerns about obligations of a given aggregate are set aside, under which conditions would such obligations be too demanding?” Since my discussion later extends the answer to this question to obligations of structured collectives, this question also does not remain purely hypothetical even for the sceptic.
- x Goodin, “Demandingness as a Virtue”, p. 2.
- xi Of course *individuals* may have an interest in how well some collective of which they are members is doing. But any cost that set back the collective’s “well-being” can then straightforwardly be construed as setbacks to these individuals’ interests, and we are back to reductive demandingness.
- xii McElwee, “Demandingness objections in ethics”.
- xiii I henceforth leave this counterfactual condition implicit.
- xiv It here does not matter whether the “ought” operator takes wide or narrow scope, i.e. whether Marie ought to (if Noël changes, change) or whether if Noël changes, Marie ought to change. This is because the difference between wide and narrow scope readings only matters if the antecedent and consequent of the condition features the same agent.
- xv This argument draws on Copp, “The Collective Moral Autonomy Thesis”, p. 384. Contrary to my position, Copp only endorses an implication from all-things-considered collective obligations to *pro tanto* individual obligations. I think this implication is too weak,

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but cannot here engage his argument in any more detail. For further critical discussion of Copp's argument, see Miller, "Against Collective Moral Autonomy" and Ludwig, "The Argument from Normative Autonomy for Collective Agents"

xvi I defend this proposal in Pinkert, "What If I Cannot Make a Difference (and Know It)".

xvii Woollard, "Dimensions of Demandingness", p. 103

xviii Woollard, "Dimensions of Demandingness", p. 104, Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, pp. 12–13.

xix The situation is complicated by the coordination problem situation between the dealer and Noël. Hence we must assume obligations beyond the conditional obligations to complete a collective pattern of actions that discharges the collective obligation, because these conditional obligations can be discharged even though the collective obligation is not.

xx See Jackson and Pargetter, "Oughts, Options, and Actualism", p. 235 for the classic example of Professor Procrastinate, which illustrates different ways in which we may ethically deal with agents' predicted non-ideal actions.