**How Much Can We Ask of Collective Agents?**

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**Introduction: Overdemandingness and Three Intuitive Examples**Overdemandingness complaints are pervasive in discussions of poverty. E.g., I’m not obliged to give to poverty relief to the point of marginal utility, because that would be overdemanding (too demanding).   
Many of our demands about global poverty are (or should!) be targeted at collective agents. Can collective agents legitimately make demandingness complaints that aren’t equivalent to (a collection of) individual overdemandingness? Three intuitive examples:

- Art galleries lack an obligation to give (much of) their proceeds to poverty relief, because “They were set up for a different purpose” (Singer 2015, 123).

- Some for-profits can stop contributing to poverty only by going out of business. But an obligation on a corporation to ends its own existence is too demanding. (Young 2011: there’s no ‘liability’ for not doing this.)

- States have the function of enforcing the rule of law in a certain territory. Any obligations they have to give foreign aid had better not undermine their ability to serve this primary function (where that function is self-regarding, not other-regarding: the objection is one of demandingness, not conflicting duties).

**1. Assumptions: Collectives and Their Members**

A collective is constituted by agents that are united under a group-level, rationally operated, distinct decision-making procedure.

Agents (‘members’) are ‘united under a group-level’ and ‘distinct’ procedure when:   
(1) each agent is committed (even if only tacitly) to abide by the procedure’s results;   
(2) the beliefs and desires that the procedure takes as inputs, and the way the procedure processes those inputs to form decisions, systematically derive from the behaviour (e.g., deference, votes, etc) of the agents;   
(3) the enactment of the group’s decisions requires actions on the part of the agents, but where those actions are also properly understood as attributable to the collective.

If a group’s procedure is ‘rationally operated,’ it’s operated with the aim of ensuring that current decisions follow from current beliefs and desires, and that current beliefs and desires accord with past beliefs, desires, and decisions plus any new evidence that has arisen since those past beliefs, desires, and decisions were formed. This might mean that the collective’s past preferences determine its current preferences—rather than members’ current preferences determining its current preferences. (E.g., an art gallery’s style of art.)   
Important: collective’s preferences can come apart from members’ preferences, but depend on member inputs.

**2. Option One: Membership Demandingness**

An obligation is overdemanding for a collective just if it’s overdemanding for at least one member. This allows irreducibility: a bi-conditional doesn’t imply reduction if (e.g.) one side grounds or explains the other.

Problems:   
(1) member overdemandingness is not *sufficient* for collective overdemandingness.   
E.g. poverty-eradication NGO: can be overdemanding on (perhaps all!) members, but not on collective.  
(2) member overdemandingness not *necessary* for collective over-demandingness.   
E.g. if all Nike’s members want to stop making sweatshop shoes; this could still be overdemanding *for Nike*.

**3. Option Two: Deep Preferences**

An obligation is overdemanding for a collective just if it frustrates the collective’s otherwise-permissible deep preference. (For imperfect duties, frustration maybe only overdemanding if happens frequently or in long-run.)

‘Deep’ = long-held, grounds other preferences, important to the agent.

‘Otherwise permissible’ = permissible when considering aspects of morality other than demandingness (not morally abhorrent).

Attractions: (1) implies member overdemandingness is neither necessary nor sufficient for collective overdemandingness (makes the irreducibility clear); (2) deep preferences seem at issue in the examples I opened with; (3) deep preferences seem to operate in both individual agents and collective agents, so this proposal gives prospects for a unified theory of demandingness across agent-types.

Problems:   
(1) Are selling sweatshop clothes, displaying art, etc, permissible *when considering aspects of morality other than demandingness*? Pursuing these preferences is harmful, or detracts from more morally important goals.

Possible rejoinder: this just shows that the Introduction’s particular examples are not overdemanding. But…

(2) Should collectives’ otherwise-permissible deep preferences play this obligation-blocking role?

- Cullity (2004) argues that we should judge *individuals* as permitted to pursue otherwise-permissible deep preferences because we judge that they are sometimes obliged to help other individuals pursue similar preferences (and if it’s permissible for others to pursue theirs, it must be permissible for me to pursue mine).

But! We don’t judge that *collectives* are obliged to help others (individual or collective) pursue their otherwise-permissible deep preferences, or that individuals are obliged to help collectives.

- Murphy (2000) argues that individuals are permitted to pursue their deep preferences because if everyone did what morality requires, then morality wouldn’t require individuals to sacrifice their deep preferences (high demands arise only due to non-compliance). But! The value of not-exceeding my fair share derives from the value of equality and respect: it’s not clear it’s valuable to treat *collectives* with such equality and respect.

- Scheffler (1982; also Williams 1973) argues that individuals’ deep preferences may be given disproportionate weight when the individual is deciding what to do, because such weight reflects the intrinsic moral significance of the personal point of view (POV from which “plans are developed,” “events are observed,” “life is lived.”)

But! Are collectives’ personal points of view intrinsically morally significant in the same way as individuals’? Phenomenology, emotions, personal relationships, embodiment.

**4. Option Three: Procedural Constraints – Reducing Overdemandingess to Ought-Implies-Can**

*Basic idea:* Collectives cannot decide to perform tasks if their decision-making procedures, and fundamental goals, make them *unable* to perform that those tasks. This is because collectives cannot use the decision-making procedure *that they already have* to change their procedure such that it can decide to perform those tasks. The collective cannot ‘break outside’ itself to alter its procedures/goals. To perform those tasks, the procedure must be changed from the outside the system that is structured and constrained by precisely that procedure.

Has virtues of Option Two: (1) The collective might be unable to produce an outcome, even though members can (by acting upon the collective, as private individuals, from the outside): irreducibly collective overdemandingness. (2) Procedural constraints are plausibly at issue in opening examples. (3) Some accounts of individual overdemandingness appeal to psychological inability (Hooker 2000, 165-6; Lichtenberg 2004; Louise 2009; Swanton 2009), so overdemandingness is unified across individuals and collectives (though individuals are less procedurally constrained than collectives, because collectives are constituted by agents).

On this proposal, overdemandingness objections collapse into ‘‘ought’ implies ‘can’’ objections.

*When does an organisation face a procedural constraint on performing an obligation?* Hardly ever!

Either (i) members are *forbidden*, by the collective’s decision-making procedure, from providing that obligation as an input into the collective’s decision-making procedure, or (ii) if members do provide that obligation as an input into the collective’s decision-making procedure, then the decision-making procedure lacks the *material and structural resources* to give that obligation the weight it deserves.

Practical test: would the collective perform the obligation if it were given a large enough incentive for doing so? If ‘yes’, the collective can, so the obligation remains. If ‘no’, then the obligation is blocked. E.g. art galleries.

Temporal dimension: a collective might lack a synchronic ability to abide by an obligation, but have a diachronic ability to do so, by using informal decision-making mechanisms to change formal mechanisms so that it becomes able. These collectives can, so the obligation remains. E.g., states.

If a collective’s duty is ruled out due to procedural constraints, then individuals (members or non-members) may have obligations to act upon the collective *from the outside* with the aim of revising its procedures, including perhaps ‘killing’ the collective and replacing it with a different collective. E.g., Nike(?).

*Conclusion: collectives cannot avoid poverty-related obligations on the basis of demandingness.*

**5. Residual Individual Complaints**

Collectives’ duties imply members’ duties. The latter might be overdemanding on individuals *conceived in their capacity independent of the collective*, i.e., conceived as a third-party. The collectives’ duties would then be blocked, not by over-demandingness, but by overdemanding effects on third-parties. But many collectives (e.g., Australia, Nike) can prevent such effects by coercively distributing burdens fairly amongst members.