The Resurrection of Satisficing?: Returning the Zombie to the Grave

**Abstract:** Even though it addresses the criticism that act consequentialism is too demanding, satisficing consequentialism is generally viewed as untenable because it permits gratuitous harm. Chappell (2019) has recently proposed an alternative theory called willpower satisficing that avoids this problem by requiring agents to act in a manner that maximizes utility at a threshold of willpower expended. Through a series of thought experiments, I demonstrate that because it ignores the level of physical effort and sacrifice required of an agent and differences in agents’ ability to summon willpower, willpower satisficing still fails to accord with our intuitions. Differences in the willpower required to perform an act are often irrelevant to what is morally required of an agent. Additionally, regardless of what threshold level of willpower is considered good enough, the theory excuses an agent from summoning a minuscule amount of additional willpower although even if it results in significantly greater good.

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The Birth and Death of Satisficing

Act consequentialism stipulates that an act is morally permissible if, and only if, it maximizes the good. One of the principal criticisms of this moral theory is that its maximization feature is too demanding (see, for example, Williams (1973), Scheffler (1982), and Mulgan (2001)). Requiring an agent to constantly act so as to maximize the good does not accord with our intuitions since, in many situations, it compels too much sacrifice and/or effort. As well, act consequentialism does not leave room for the possibility of supererogatory acts since an agent is always required to maximize the good. To the extent that we believe that agents perform acts that go above and beyond the call of duty, it is problematic when a moral theory denies this.

One way to address these criticisms is to simply remove the maximizing feature of act consequentialism. Borrowing from the economic concept of satisficing in which rational decision-makers seek to meet some threshold of a desirable variable rather than the maximal value, Slote (1984) proposed a corresponding moral theory of satisficing consequentialism. Instead of requiring an agent to maximize the impersonal good every time he or she acts, satisficing would make an act permissible if its consequences were sufficient, or “good enough”. Satisficing consequentialism addresses these two criticisms of act consequentialism: it is not overly demanding since it does not require agents to constantly maximize the good, and it also allows for supererogation since there are available acts that an agent can perform that exceed the required outcome threshold.

Hurka (1990) suggested that Slote’s version of satisficing is ambiguous since it admits of two different interpretations, which he calls absolute level and comparative satisficing. The absolute level view holds that an agent is only required to act in a way that at least meets a certain threshold level of goodness even if this level of the good is sub-maximal. The agent is required to attain some
absolute level of goodness regardless of the alternative acts available to him or her, after which any further obligation to increase the good ceases since the state of the world is reasonably good already. In contrast, the comparative view holds that an act is permissible if the good that results from its outcome is some reasonable percentage of the alternative act or acts that would maximize the good. Hurka rejected comparative satisficing consequentialism because it suggests that if people are suffering badly and we are unable to alleviate all of their pain, we are permitted to do less than the most we can do to help them, which he finds implausible. However, Hurka endorsed absolute level satisficing.

Although absolute level satisficing appeared to be a promising response to the demandingness objection that act consequentialism faces, Bradley (2006) raised fatal criticisms of the theory that led to its demise. Bradley considered various possible expressions of both of Hurka’s views of satisficing consequentialism and found each of them to be implausible. Provided that the absolute or comparative goodness threshold is met, both versions permit agents to act so as to bring about worse consequences than would have resulted from inaction. So, for example, if the level of goodness exceeds the absolute or comparative threshold, it would be morally permissible for an agent to gratuitously harm others or prevent goodness from occurring provided that the level of goodness remained above the stipulated threshold. Given these counterintuitive implications of satisficing consequentialism, it appeared untenable as a viable moral theory unless this gratuitous harm problem could be addressed. Satisficing consequentialism was laid to rest.

The Resurrection of Satisficing

Recently, Chappell (2019) has attempted to resurrect satisficing consequentialism by framing demandingness in terms of willpower or effort instead of costs to our welfare, as well as by introducing an effort ceiling. His theory stipulates that “an act A is permissible iff it produces no less
utility than any alternative action the agent could perform at a cost of up to either: (i) X willpower; or (ii) the willpower cost of A, whichever is greater.” (Chappell, 2019, p. 255). Chappell indicates that the amount of willpower (i.e., X) required of an agent may be context-sensitive and will vary depending on the circumstances. The required willpower threshold will be compatible with “an adequate degree of moral concern” (p. 257), which consists of a combination of altruistic concern and effort. Chappell clarifies that he uses the word “willpower” such that it refers to “effort of will” rather than physical effort. Thus, in an example Chappell provides concerning a person attempting to get in shape, the relevant effort for his theory is the mental effort that requires him or her to get off the couch and go the gym rather than the physical effort required of the exerciser once he or she arrives there.

The motivation for willpower satisficing is the belief that an agent is not required to perform the utility maximizing act when this would be too demanding on him or her in terms of effort. Thus, in contrast to Slote, who believed that it was acceptable to bring about an inferior outcome even when a better outcome was known and was available at no additional cost to the agent, Chappell (2019) believes that utility maximization is not appropriate only when it is “too much to ask of the agent” (p. 251) because of the excessive amount of willpower required. However, willpower satisficing requires an agent to exert a threshold level of willpower and maximize utility given that level. Thus, Chappell’s version of satisficing consequentialism avoids the irrationality criticisms that were leveled at Slote’s view. Willpower satisficing also avoids the gratuitous harm problem since it still requires utility maximization at the willpower threshold.

**Concerns with Willpower Satisficing**

Chappell suggests that willpower satisficing provides an intuitive account of moral obligations since it avoids aspects of the demandingness objection and also allows for
supererogatory acts, namely those that exceed the willpower threshold and achieve more overall good. However, in avoiding the criticisms of act consequentialism and traditional satisficing, willpower satisficing leads to new problems: (1) willpower is often irrelevant in determinations of what is morally required; (2) willpower satisficing conflicts with our intuition that what is morally required usually applies to all agents regardless of their personal predispositions, such as weakness of will; and (3) willpower satisficing inappropriately ignores self-sacrifice of welfare and physical effort in cases where agents have great willpower. The following thought experiments make this apparent.

(i) The Celebrity Gameshow

Jackson is a famous actor who has been invited to participate in a nationally renowned game show where he can win up to $100,000 for a charity of his choice. He accepts the invitation and advises the game show that the charity he is playing for is the Beverly Hills Boys Club. This non-profit organization, which Jackson joined as a teenager, is raising money for a new gold plaque to display at the entrance of its multimillion dollar clubhouse. Though Jackson could generate more good by selecting a charity that helps alleviate human suffering, that would take much more effort of will than he would have to generate in order to choose the Beverly Hills Boys Club, which requires minimal willpower given Jackson’s affinity for the organization. In contrast, Jackson views helping other organizations, which most people would deem more deserving of charity, as a very arduous chore. However, under willpower satisficing, if Jackson’s effort of will expended to help the boys’ club meets the required willpower threshold, then his act of choosing a dubious charity is morally permissible if it maximizes utility at that threshold. Yet, when we assess the deontic status of Jackson’s action, what seems relevant is that he is able to select a charity that will result in a higher amount of good being created at no additional personal cost other than exercising additional
willpower. Rather than considering the amount of willpower that Jackson is required to summon, the pertinent factor is the amount of self-sacrifice that Jackson would endure.

This example also illustrates that effort of will is an odd criterion of rightness in many situations. Jackson’s action seems wrong because his agent-centered reason for preferring the boys’ club as a charity is not important enough to override his moral obligation to produce more good. Relevant factors in moral decisions, such as ignoring agent-centered reasons, as well as increased physical effort and personal sacrifice, will often require more willpower, though Chappell stresses that physical effort and effort of will are distinct in his gym example. He is correct that willpower will not always align with these other factors, and when they do not, the use of willpower as a guide to what is morally required may be inappropriate. Willpower costs will vary from agent to agent and may not be aligned with the amount of physical effort, sacrifice, or other decisive reasons that are morally relevant. Some people may be naturally weak-willed, but the relevance of this factor in determining a person’s moral obligations is suspect, as the following example illustrates.

(ii) Beowulf the Brave

In the final act of the famous Anglo-Saxon poem, Beowulf, the eponymous king of the Geats and some of his men proceed to the dragon’s lair with the intent to slay the beast. However, Beowulf is much braver than the Geats who accompany him. As a result, when they actually encounter the dragon, all but one of Beowulf’s allies run away in fear. Beowulf is able to summon the willpower required to face the dragon, but in doing so, he puts himself at great risk and ultimately sacrifices his life in order to protect the kingdom.

If what is morally required of Beowulf and his men depends on maximizing utility at a threshold willpower cost, as Chappell contends, then the men’s abandonment of Beowulf may be justified. Suppose that what is morally required of both Beowulf and his allies is the summoning of
100 units of willpower each (i.e., this would be “X” in Chappell’s definition of willpower satisficing). Because he is so brave, Beowulf does not exceed this threshold when he proceeds to fight the dragon. However, because they are not so brave, Beowulf’s allies reach the threshold when they merely confront the dragon, so they are justified in running away provided that they maximized utility at their level of willpower. Perhaps there were other residents of the Geat’s village who were even more weak-willed than the men who abandoned Beowulf at the dragon’s lair. They reached the 100 units of willpower threshold by merely summoning the will to briefly cheer for Beowulf and the soldiers as they left the village. However, the fact that Beowulf’s compatriots are relatively weak-willed when compared to Beowulf does not seem to be a morally relevant excuse that exempts them from joining him in battle. What seems more salient is the amount of self-sacrifice required of each of the Geats rather than each agent’s personal attributes that impact their ability to summon willpower. It is odd to require Beowulf to risk or sacrifice more simply because he needs to summon less will in order to do so. Similarly, it is a peculiar feature of willpower satisficing that it permits those who are extremely weak-willed to sacrifice nothing and likewise morally permits them to act in a manner that is intuitively wrong.

(iii) The Wedding Disaster

Our intuitions suggest that in many situations, what is morally required applies equally to all agents regardless of our personal predispositions. Suppose that Angela and Bob are both attending a wedding and are alone in the adjoining banquet room with the wedding cake. Both Angela and Bob love cake, but while Bob has the willpower to control his urge to carve himself a piece of the cake, Angela does not have the willpower to resist her desire and consumes the top layer. Yet, we are unlikely to claim that Bob’s and Angela’s different actions are both morally permissible because of their personal predilections concerning cake.
Certainly there are some occasions in which an agent’s willpower is relevant to what is morally required of him or her. For example, we might excuse a person who is gravely afraid of heights from rescuing a cat that is stranded up a tree. However, there are limits to our consideration of weakness of will. For instance, we would not exempt an agent from a moral obligation to rescue an infant who is face down in Peter Singer’s (1972) shallow pond thought experiment simply because he has hydrophobia. It is the sacrifice required in the pond scenario and the good that results from saving the child rather than the amount of willpower summoned that determines our moral obligation to act.

The examples above suggest that if satisficing consequentialism is to be a viable moral theory, then it should be a function of self-sacrifice rather than willpower. Thus, an act would be permissible if, and only if, it produces no less utility than any alternative action that the agent could perform with up to X cost in self-sacrifice. This would avoid the gratuitous harm problem in the same way that willpower satisficing does. Chappell considers personal cost as a limiting feature in his theory, but rejects it because it accommodates akrasia when an agent faces prudential demands, such as following a demanding exercise program or becoming a vegetarian. He believes that these are burdensome to an agent even though they are not costly. However, these prudential demands do involve a self-sacrifice cost in these situations (e.g., the cost of sore muscle pain and the reduction in relaxation time for the exerciser and the cost of not being able to enjoy the taste of meat for the vegetarian). More damning for a self-sacrifice version of satisficing consequentialism is Bradley’s concern that it is unmotivated. He suggests that instead of responding to the demandingness objection to act consequentialism through the adoption of some form of satisficing, we can simply permit of exceptions to maximizing consequentialism in cases where the cost of self-sacrifice would be too great.
(iii) The Monk’s Sacrifice

Another concern with willpower satisficing is that it may demand too much of those with limitless willpower and thereby fails to overcome the demandingness objection it was meant to address. For example, imagine that a devout monk is meditating at home when there is a knock upon the door. His visitors are two physicians who advise the monk that he has a rare condition that permits him to be a universal organ donor. Additionally, they inform him that there are five important world leaders in the local hospital that will die unless they receive immediate organ transplants from an acceptable donor. If the monk sacrifices his life to save these five dignitaries, it will maximize utility given the large amount of good that will result from their future actions.

The monk’s lifetime pursuit of the practice of asceticism, as well as his faith, has provided him with endless and effortless willpower. Thus, when the two physicians call on him to sacrifice his life for the benefit of the five world leaders, the effort of will required of him is no greater than that of any other act he might perform. Therefore, according to willpower satisficing, the greatest possible sacrifice would be required of the monk provided that it maximized utility. In fact, if the level of willpower is the only relevant criterion for determining what act an agent is required to perform, then there would also be no limit to the physical effort required of the monk since this would not impact his effort of will.

These thought experiments suggest that willpower is often an inappropriate unit of measure for determining the deontic status of our actions. The evaluation of Jackson’s act of selecting the Beverly Hills Boys Club as his gameshow charity appears to involve the weighing of his agent-centered reasons for selecting one organization against the overall utility that results from his choice rather than merely a consideration of willpower. Effort of will also ignores the relevance of sacrifice and physical effort in the cases of Beowulf and the monk who respectively possess high and
limitless willpower. These cases indicate that though effort of will may be relevant to determining our moral obligations, it is insufficient as a sole criterion.

Yet, regardless of the set of criteria that one employs to develop a form of satisficing consequentialism, the abandonment of the maximizing feature of act consequentialism becomes problematic since it seems impossible to determine what constitutes “good enough” in terms of willpower, physical effort, sacrifice, or outcome when a slight increase in the measured criterion produces substantially more good. Chappell attempts to address this concern by instituting an effort ceiling that ensures that the willpower threshold of X qualifies an agent as “adequately concerned” (p. 7). However, rather than providing a clear criterion of rightness or guide to decision-making, this simply suggests that when the willpower threshold permits that scenario that does not accord with our intuitions, we must simply increase X for that agent. This belies the requirement that a moral theory be general in nature.

**Conclusion**

Although consequentialism has many seductive qualities, ethicists continue to express concern regarding the demandingness of the moral theory. While satisficing consequentialism comports with our intuition that the maximizing requirement of act consequentialism is often too severe, the relaxation of this requirement leads to the gratuitous harm problem. Chappell’s willpower satisficing avoids this flaw, but still potentially permits agents to avoid acts that require minimal additional willpower, but would produce substantial amounts of additional utility. In doing so, willpower satisficing discards one of the intuitive features of traditional satisficing consequentialism, its denial of the obligation to always maximize, and also ignores morally salient aspects, such as physical effort, sacrifice, and inherent differences in agent willpower. As a result, satisficing consequentialism must again be laid to rest.
References


