

## Is Genuine Satisficing Rational?

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**Abstract** There have been different interpretations of satisficing rationality. A common view is that it is sometimes rationally permitted to choose an option one judges is good enough even when one does not know that it is the best option. But there is available a more radical view of satisficing. On this view, it is rationally permitted to choose an option one judges is good enough even when a better option is known to be available. In this paper I distinguish between two possible interpretations of ‘genuine’ satisficing, a *de re* and a *de dicto* interpretation. I then argue that while *de re* genuine satisficing is always irrational, *de dicto* genuine satisficing might be rationally permissible. In fact, *de dicto* genuine satisficing does not appear to be covered by existing accounts of satisficing behaviour.

**Key words** rationality · satisficing · moderation · non-consequentialism · virtue

Some authors have argued that it can be rational to choose a satisfactory, suboptimal option even when one knows that a better option is included in one’s set of options. They call this ‘genuine satisficing’ to distinguish it from ordinary satisficing according to which the satisficer chooses a satisfactory, suboptimal option even when she does not know that it is the best option. Other authors have objected that while ordinary satisficing is rational, genuine satisficing is always rationally unmotivated. However, genuine satisficing might be understood in two ways. More specifically, it is ambiguous as between (1) ‘It can be rational to choose a satisfactory, suboptimal option even when one knows of another option included in one’s set of options that it is better’, what we might call its *de re* sense, and (2) ‘It can be rational to choose a satisfactory, suboptimal option even when one knows that a better option is included in one’s set of options but does not know which of these options is better’, what we might call its *de dicto* sense. The authors who have defended the rationality of genuine satisficing seem to assume (1). In this paper I argue that while *de re* genuine satisficing is always irrational, *de dicto* genuine satisficing can be rationally

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permissible. In fact, *de dicto* genuine satisficing appears to share important features with both *de re* genuine satisficing and ordinary satisficing even if it is different from both.

The essay is in three main sections. In Section 1 I examine and criticize two arguments for the claim that *de re* genuine satisficing is rationally permissible which are based on the premise that there are available a variety of perspectives to human beings so that one may choose a satisfactory option from one perspective even if from another perspective an alternative option is better. The main difficulty for these (and similar) arguments is that their examples of *de re* genuine satisficing only seem to make sense when described in maximizing terms. In Section 2 I examine and criticize two arguments based on non-consequentialism. According to these arguments, if non-consequentialism is true, *de re* genuine satisficing is rationally permissible because one's reasons may be grounded in virtues which rationally justify one's acting in a way that brings about an outcome that is not the best. The trouble with these arguments is that they fail to explain why the non-consequentialist satisficer thinks that the option she rejects is *better* than the one she chooses, as well as why she chooses the satisfactory option because it is *good enough*. Section 3 offers a more general defence of scepticism about *de re* genuine satisficing. Here I argue that it is ruled out by what seems a plausible constraint on rational action, as well as what appears to be the most natural interpretation of the meanings of terms such as 'good enough' and 'best'. However, even if *de re* genuine satisficing is rationally unmotivated, *de dicto* genuine satisficing can be rationally permissible. I end the paper by suggesting an example of *de dicto* genuine satisficing that does not appear to conform to any of the standard models of satisficing.

## 1 Genuine Satisficing and Multiple Perspectives

Instead of concluding that some action is best or better than its alternatives, we often conclude that it is good enough or fine. We 'satisfice' rather than maximize personal goodness or well-being. There have been different views of what such satisficing might involve. Consider first the following case: suppose you are trying to decide on a restaurant for dinner. You want to find a place with good food, not too expensive and with a nice atmosphere. Rather than evaluate all the available options, you consider a few and choose the first which, given your aspiration level, is good enough. Since you are choosing an option you judge is satisfactory or good enough even if you don't know that it is the best option, you are satisficing rather than maximizing personal goodness.<sup>1</sup> Now, contrast this with the following case which has been suggested by Michael Slote: suppose you are trying to decide whether to eat the snack on your desk. You had a good lunch, and you are not now hungry; neither, on the other hand, are you sated. After a moments deliberation you judge that you might be better off enjoying the snack, yet you knowingly choose not to eat it. This is not because you are afraid to spoil your dinner, because you are on a diet, or because you are too busy. It is simply because you don't feel any need for it; you are perfectly satisfied as you are. Since you choose an option which you know to be less good, and reject an available option you know is better, you are satisficing rather than maximizing personal goodness.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If not indicated otherwise, I shall by 'option' in what follows mean 'action' or 'act-option'.

<sup>2</sup> See Slote (1989, p. 23).

These two cases illustrate two kinds of satisficing behaviour. There are several crucial differences. In the first kind of case satisficing is implemented in a dynamic context: you search and evaluate your options as you go, possibly without a principled way to end the search. In this context satisficing is employed as a stopping rule whose use cuts down the search time for options.<sup>3</sup> Since the likely costs of a further search would outweigh the likely benefits of finding the best restaurant, satisficing in this kind of context is widely held to be a rational strategy; you satisfice in order to secure certain benefits which you would be unable to secure had you relied on a maximizing strategy.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, in the second kind of case, the context is static: you don't search and evaluate your options as you go, but are presented with a set of nicely ranked options. Here you are claimed to satisfice because you choose an option you judge to be good enough even when you know of an available option that it is better.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, your choice of the option that is good enough does not depend on whether the likely costs of further search would outweigh the likely benefits.

In this paper I want to focus on the second kind of satisficing, which is sometimes referred to as 'genuine satisficing'.<sup>6</sup> Some authors have argued that genuine satisficing can be rational even if it is not a strategy for achieving some overall good, i.e., even if it does not have any cost saving benefits.<sup>7</sup> Before examining some arguments for this view, let me make some preliminary remarks about the claim being made. An initial response to the description of genuine satisficing just given might be as follows: 'the claim appears to be that the genuine satisficer prefers A over B, yet rationally chooses B. But according to a plausible view of 'preference', preferring A over B simply *means* rationally choosing A (or being disposed to choose A). The description of genuine satisficing is therefore incoherent'.<sup>8</sup> This objection depends on the assumption that an agent's preference captures all her reasons for choice. If this is correct, it does not make sense to distinguish between an agent's judgement of betterness and her rational choice. But, of course, the notion of any kind of satisficing behaviour, genuine or not, presupposes this distinction. If it can be shown that satisficing is rational, therefore, this objection is irrelevant.

A second point worth mentioning is that it seems wrong, as some critics appear to assume, that proponents of genuine satisficing claim that it is *always* rational to satisfice in the genuine sense, i.e., reject the best for the good enough.<sup>9</sup> That would have been very implausible indeed. Rather, their claim, I think, should be understood as the much more modest claim that it is not the case that it is always irrational to reject the best for the good enough. This weaker claim is consistent with the possibility that there may be circumstances in which genuine satisficing in fact would be irrational. So, constructing a few counterexamples to the claim that being a genuine satisficer is always rational, as some critics have done, is not necessarily sufficient to reject genuine satisficing.<sup>10</sup> Of course,

<sup>3</sup> See Byron (1998, p. 78).

<sup>4</sup> This is the most common view of satisficing. See for example, Elster (1984), Pettit and Brennan (1986), Byron (1998), Schmitz (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Thus, Swanton claims that in genuine satisficing 'a good enough option may be preferred to a better. It is assumed that a better option is included in a set of options that have been enumerated and evaluated. I shall follow Slote in calling this satisficing'. Swanton (1997, p. 83).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Weber (2004, p. 78).

<sup>7</sup> Genuine satisficing has been defended by e.g., Slote (1989), Stocker (1990), Brown (1992), Swanton (1997), and more recently by Weber (2004), and van Roojen (2004).

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., Pettit (1984, p. 173).

<sup>9</sup> Pettit may seem to interpret Slote this way. See Pettit (1985, pp. 402–403).

<sup>10</sup> Mulgan's criticism of Slote might be vulnerable to this objection. See Mulgan (1993).

proponents of genuine satisficing owe us some story about exactly what conditions need to be present in a case for genuine satisficing to be rational. But all that is really required for establishing the weaker claim is that it can be demonstrated that the agents in some of these cases are in fact not guilty of irrationality.

Let me now turn to some arguments for the claim that genuine satisficing is rationally permissible. The simplest argument for this claim, originally suggested by Michael Slote, is to appeal to the virtue of moderation.<sup>11</sup> Pursuing this line one might say that the snack eater in the above illustration is a moderate individual and that being moderate is a reason for him to choose not to eat the snack, even if he judges that eating it would be better. Thus, moderate folks do not always seek the best or the most, but might be content with a lesser but personally satisfying degree of well-being. There is nothing irrational about such behaviour.

It is important to be clear about the connection assumed here between moderation and satisficing. The claim, I take it, is not that satisficers *as such* have a reason to be moderate. Clearly, it is quite possible that the satisficer has an outlandish conception of ‘good enough’ (e.g., Michael Byron provides the example of someone who satisfices with respect to eating chocolate chip cookies, but whose idea of a satisfactory number of cookies is about three dozen.<sup>12</sup> As Byron points out, being satisfied only after eating thirty-six cookies hardly seems moderate). The claim, as I understand it, is rather that being moderate may be *a reason* for satisficing. In other words, the connection between moderation and satisficing is that of the former rationalizing the latter, not that of the latter entailing the former.

Now, as stated above, the appeal to moderation does little to show why genuine satisficing is rational. The reason is that it does not address the main worry of the sceptic, which is that genuine satisficing is rationally unmotivated since it appears to violate a necessary condition of rationality, namely that ‘one’s choice is rational only if one did not recognize clearly better reasons for choosing any of one’s forgone alternatives’.<sup>13</sup> Let us call this ‘the Better Reasons condition’ of rationality.<sup>14</sup> The problem is that genuine satisficing appears to violate the Better Reasons condition because the genuine satisficer has no reason for choosing what she chooses in preference to what she rejects. Since she judges that B is good enough but that A is better (we assume that she knows that she cannot do both), she may have a reason for choosing B rather than nothing. However, she has no reason for choosing B in preference to A. If she ranks A over B all things considered, she only has a reason for choosing A. If she still chooses B, her choice is rationally unmotivated.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Slote (1989, pp. 32–47). In fact, Slote also has another argument for genuine satisficing, which is that the maximizing view leaves no conceptual space for supererogation. See Slote (1989, p. 3). I will not discuss this argument as the notion of supererogation raises various other complex issues, e.g., the role of duties in moral theory which is beyond the scope of this paper to address.

<sup>12</sup> See Byron (1998, p. 88).

<sup>13</sup> See Schmidtz (1995, p. 38) for this formulation.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow this term from Byron (1998, p. 85). The Better Reasons condition is widely held to be a general condition of rationality. See e.g., Pettit (1984), Schmidtz (1995), Byron (1998), Swanton (1997). Note that the Better Reasons condition does not rule out that there may also be a ‘Good Enough Reasons’ condition, i. e., that one’s choice is rational even if one recognizes that one’s reasons might not be the best of reasons, as long as they seem good enough. Dynamic satisficing would be an example. However, dynamic satisficing does not entail that one recognizes clearly better reasons for choosing any of one’s forgone alternatives.

<sup>15</sup> The objection that genuine satisficing is rationally unmotivated has been a common objection to Slote’s account. Versions can be found e.g., in Pettit (1984), Hurka (1990), Mulgan (1993), Schmidtz (2004).

Proponents of genuine satisficing have suggested different responses to this kind of objection. One response is to reject the claim that the Better Reasons condition is a general condition of rationality. This response is usually backed up with arguments to the effect that agents have available a variety of perspectives, and that the same event might have different value depending on the perspective taken. Thus, Michael Slote has argued that if a person's perspective is, say, that of a moderate individual, she may have a reason, *from this point of view*, to choose moderate wealth or well-being over great wealth or well-being. If so, it does not matter that, from another point of view, she might have a reason to think that having great wealth or well-being would be better.<sup>16</sup> Does this mean that the satisficer is knowingly choosing a worse action over one she knows is better? If so, she would appear to be guilty of weakness of will. According to Slote this objection is based on confusing two senses of the notion of an 'option;' we might be speaking of an 'option' as a state of affairs that results from a certain action, or alternatively, as the action itself. When we speak of the moderate individual as rejecting the better option, it is 'option' in the former sense we mean, he claims, i.e., the sense in which she rejects to do something that will result in her being better off than if she had chosen the alternative option. Thus, the perspective that provides her with a reason to think that having great wealth or well-being would be better is the perspective from which she compares the values of the results of the actions. Since, according to Slote, she does not think that the act of moderation is a *worse action*, the perspective that provides her with a reason to choose this action is the perspective from which she compares the values of the actions independent of their results.<sup>17</sup> If I have understood Slote correctly then, the picture he suggests is the following: the genuine satisficer judges that A is better than B in terms of the values of the results of A and B. However, she also judges that B has value independent of the value of its results. That gives her a reason to choose B over A, as long as B has good enough results. So, it is not the case that genuine satisficing is rationally unmotivated.

Now, put this way, there is an uninteresting sense in which this picture might be true. It is perfectly rational to judge that A has better results than B, but still judge that B is a better action than A. For one may judge that, given the values of A and of B in addition to the values of their results, B is *overall* a better action than A. In fact, Slote's example of the snacker can plausibly be explained in this way. Thus, the snacker judges that taking a snack would be 'more enjoyable' than abstaining but does not judge that taking the snack is *overall* a better action than abstaining. This interpretation seems consistent with the possibility that an agent might have reasons from different points of view. Clearly, there is nothing in this idea that rules out that some of these reasons might be defeated by others. So, something needs to be added to the claim about different perspectives to get us to the claim about genuine satisficing. One natural candidate perhaps, could be a claim about *incomparability*. The incomparability-claim holds that some values are such that they simply cannot be compared. On the most plausible interpretation, this simply means that they cannot be ranked, neither ordinarily nor cardinally; there simply is no positive value relation that holds between them.<sup>18</sup> Given incomparability, the interpretation of Slote's example suggested above seems misguided. Why? Because it is not the case that the agent in this example is comparing the values of the results of the alternative actions with the values of these actions themselves. These values are simply too diverse for comparison;

<sup>16</sup> Slote (1989, pp. 21–22).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23–25.

<sup>18</sup> For this definition of incomparability, see Chang (1997, p. 4).

there is no common basis on which such a comparison could proceed. For that reason, Slote's snacker does not conclude that her reasons on balance suggest that the moderate action is better than the other.

However, it is difficult to see how this move can be of much help for proponents of genuine satisficing: even if we assume that the genuine satisficer does not compare the value of the moderate action with the value of the results of the immoderate action due to the incomparability of these values, it still seems that she must compare the value of the moderate action with the value of the immoderate action. The reason is that there otherwise seems to be no basis for talk about a rational choice at all; it would be a case of 'picking' rather than choosing.<sup>19</sup> But if the genuine satisficer compares the value of the moderate action with the value of the immoderate action, i.e., concludes that the moderate action is better than the immoderate action with respect to expressing the virtue of moderation, then she is not just choosing the moderate action because it is good enough, as any claim about satisficing must hold: she is choosing it because it is *better* than the immoderate action with respect to expressing the virtue of moderation. But if that is the case, it no longer is appropriate to say that she is 'satisficing'.

It seems fair to conclude, I think, that Slote does not succeed to provide any compelling reasons for the claim that genuine satisficing is rational. A more recent attempt to provide such reasons, which 'builds on what Slote and others have said', has been suggested by Michael Weber.<sup>20</sup> As Slote, Weber maintains that a key to understanding genuine satisficing is that there are available a variety of perspectives to human beings, but he has a different view of what this means. According to Weber, there is on the one hand the good viewed from 'the momentary point of view' – the individual sees certain goods, for example pleasure and pain, that makes her better or worse off at the moment and thus contributes to her momentary well-being. On the other hand, there is the good viewed from 'the point of view of the individual's whole life' – the individual sees certain goods as contributing to the quality of her life as a whole.<sup>21</sup> According to Weber, there need be no all-encompassing perspective that somehow could bring together the values of these different perspectives. So how does this show that the snacker in Slote's example is rational? Weber's idea seems to be the following: the snacker judges that the pleasure of eating the snack can bring great satisfaction in the moment. However, she also judges that from the perspective of her life as a whole, whether she enjoys such a snack is of little or no significance. According to Weber, this discrepancy between the two different perspectives warrants a permission to attach less significance than is warranted by the momentary perspective to what is important from that perspective because of the demands of the whole-life perspective. Thus, the agent recognizes that from the momentary perspective there is more value in eating the snack than not eating it. At the same time, she recognizes that from the perspective of her life as a whole, eating the snack is of no significance. This gives her a reason to discount the value of eating the snack from the momentary perspective.

Unlike Slote, Weber does not distinguish between the value of the action and the value of its results, and his account does not seem to depend on such a distinction. Thus, in response to the objection to Slote's account mentioned above, he does not have to deny that

<sup>19</sup> Note that it is assumed here that there are only two options in this case. A common view is that if an agent is indifferent between two options, i.e., one is as good as the other, there is no room left for rational choice. Still, the agent might 'pick' one of the options. For a useful discussion of cases of 'picking', see Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser (1977).

<sup>20</sup> Weber (2004, p. 78).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

the satisficer compares the value of the moderate action with the value of the immoderate action. The reason she still can be said to be satisficing on Weber's account is that she discounts the momentary value of eating the snack in virtue of the demands of the perspective of her life as a whole, a perspective from which she is indifferent between eating the snack and not eating it. One might object here that there is something odd in the idea that a person in order to satisfice with respect to an event as trivial as eating a snack or not, need to step back and take up 'the perspective of tenseless reflection on her life as a whole' (to use Weber's phrase).<sup>22</sup> When viewed from that perspective, most events in daily life would tend to appear pretty insignificant. If the whole-life perspective in some sense conditions the momentary perspective, it would seem to follow that we are inclined to satisfice with respect to options of lesser importance all the time. However, a more serious difficulty with Weber's account, I think, is that it is unclear that what he describes as 'genuine satisficing' is really genuine satisficing in the sense Slote and others have defended. Weber claims that the discrepancy between the different perspectives warrants a permission to attach 'less significance' to what is important from the momentary perspective; that we 'discount' the value of the pleasure from the momentary perspective. This raises two questions. First, what is it about this discrepancy that rationally justifies the satisficer in discounting the value of eating the snack from the momentary perspective? Second, if the satisficer discounts the value of eating the snack from the momentary perspective in virtue of her whole-life perspective, how can she be said to choose not to eat the snack while still maintaining that it is better to eat it than not to eat it? Starting with the first, it is not clear why the fact that the satisficer is indifferent between eating the snack and not eating it as viewed from the whole-life perspective should provide her with a reason to discount the value of eating the snack as viewed from the momentary perspective. Weber seems to think that just by recognizing the incommensurable demands of these perspectives, the satisficer is provided with such a reason, but it is difficult to see why that should be the case. If she is indifferent from the whole-life perspective, it seems that she also should be indifferent between discounting or not discounting the value of eating the snack from the momentary perspective. One natural thought, I think, would be that if she discounts the value of eating the snack from the momentary perspective, it must be because she attaches less significance to what is important from that perspective since she attaches more value to the whole-life perspective. Having chosen to view the event in the whole-life perspective she can then discount the value it has from the momentary perspective. But of course, then she is not satisficing in the genuine sense. She is choosing a satisfactory option because she is maximizing with respect to temporal perspectives; she satisfices in order to secure certain benefits which she would be unable to secure had she relied on a maximizing strategy, i.e., the benefits got from 'putting things in their right perspective.' Second, Weber's idea seems to be that discounting the value of eating the snack from the momentary perspective explains why the satisficer is judging that not eating the snack is good enough in terms of momentary well-being. However, if she is a genuine satisficer she is also judging, at the time she is choosing not to eat the snack, that eating the snack is better than not eating it. But from what perspective is she making that judgement? Certainly not from the whole-life perspective since from that perspective she is indifferent between eating the snack or not eating it. So, the idea must be that she makes it from the momentary perspective. But if she discounts the value of eating the snack from the momentary perspective how can she at the same time judge that eating the snack is better than not eating it from that perspective? The trouble is that Weber's explanation of why the

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

snacker chooses an option she judges to be good enough appears to rule out that she rejects an option she actually thinks is better. Thus, even if what Weber describes might be satisficing behaviour, it is not clear that it is the genuine kind of satisficing defended by Slote and others.

## 2 Genuine Satisficing and Non-consequentialism

If non-consequentialism is true, does it follow that genuine satisficing is rational? In this section I shall examine and criticize two different arguments that answers this question in the positive. Let me start with an argument suggested by Christine Swanton.<sup>23</sup>

Swanton wants to defend satisficing in Slote's sense, but makes it clear that she rejects two of the assumptions on which Slote bases his defence. First, she does not accept Slote's assumption that the genuine satisficer prefers an action that has good enough results over one that has better results. Defending this claim within a non-consequentialist framework, she claims, would only look like a preference for non-consequentialism over consequentialism. According to Swanton, the genuine satisficer should be seen as preferring an action that is good enough over one she judges is better *both* in terms of the values of their results *and* in terms of their values independent of their results.<sup>24</sup> Second, unlike Slote, Swanton insists on maintaining the Better Reasons condition as a general condition of rationality.<sup>25</sup> It is correct, she claims, that if the genuine satisficer really had recognized clearly better reasons for choosing any of her foregone alternatives she would be irrational. Swanton's solution turns on a distinction between the satisficer's ordering of her 'reasons' from better to worse, and her ordering of her 'options' from better to worse. The satisficer judges that A is better than B, but chooses B because it is good enough. According to Swanton, she does not judge that her *reasons* for choosing A are better than her reasons for choosing B; she only judges that choosing A is better than choosing B. This is because her reasons for choosing B express feelings, desires, attitudes or emotions characteristic of virtue, which she recognizes are undefeated by her reasons for choosing A. Since expressing virtue cannot be irrational, it follows that the agent is rational when she chooses B for these reasons. In fact, Swanton wants to sever altogether the connection between the idea of an option being 'best' or 'better than' an alternative option, and the idea that that option necessarily is 'the more rational option'.<sup>26</sup>

The crucial idea in Swanton's defence of genuine satisficing, as I understand it, is that the satisficer's reasons for choosing the good enough option are indefeasible. However, there are, I think, difficulties with using this idea to justify genuine satisficing. First, what does it mean to say that a reason is 'indefeasible' in this context? One natural interpretation perhaps, could be that it is a reason that *silences* all opposing reasons. In other words, any potential opposing reason is seen by the virtuous satisficer as not counting as *a reason* at all; it is simply not brought to bear on her view of the situation.<sup>27</sup> The trouble with this, however, is that even if we accept the notion of silencing as a feature of moral reasons, it is unclear why this notion should allow us to conclude that the satisficer thinks of the

<sup>23</sup> Swanton (1997).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> This notion of 'silencing' goes back to McDowell (1998).



alternative she rejects as being *better* than the one she chooses. On the contrary, one very natural idea would be that the undefeated reason also would silence any potential *thought* to the effect that the rejected alternative is better than the one chosen. For example, on the silencing view, Slote's snacker is seen to have got herself into a state in which the fact that she would enjoy this snack was she to eat it no longer counts for her as a reason to eat it. This reason has got silenced. But so, it seems, must the thought that eating the snack is *better* than not eating it. How could she possibly *think* the latter if all her opposing reasons have got silenced?<sup>28</sup>

But there is another (perhaps more serious) difficulty with the idea that the satisficer's reason for choice are infeasible. Even assuming that non-consequentialism is true, the infeasibility idea makes it difficult to see why the agent is choosing the 'satisfactory' option *because* she judges that it is good enough.<sup>29</sup> The notion of 'good enough,' by suggesting that some adequate level of goodness has been reached, only seems to make sense given that the agent ranks her options in terms of more or less goodness. Of course, Swanton does not deny that the satisficer ranks her options in terms of more or less goodness, but she denies that her *reason* for choosing the satisfactory option has anything to do with this ranking. In consequence, the fact that the option she is choosing is *good enough* seems to be explanatorily irrelevant with respect to her choosing of it: she is choosing the satisfactory option because choosing it expresses virtue, not because it is good enough in terms of the level of goodness reached. So, even if she is choosing something other than what is best, why say that she is 'satisficing'?

In a recent paper, Mark van Roojen has suggested a line of reply to a similar kind of criticism.<sup>30</sup> He agrees that Swanton fails to account for the 'good enough' in rationalizing the satisficer's choice, and thinks this stems from her claim that the satisficer's reasons for making that choice are infeasible. However, on a version of non-consequentialism that allows these reasons themselves to be defeated in the face of importantly good or bad consequences, the thought that the outcome is good enough *will* play a role in rationalizing her choice, he claims. Van Roojen's response turns on a distinction between 'right action' and 'best action'. If an action is *right*, i.e., justified by non-consequentialist considerations (e.g., being virtuous), it does not matter that these considerations are defeated by the agent's reasons for choosing an action that has better consequences, as long as the right action has consequences that are good enough. Thus, to take a familiar example, suppose a father chooses to save his own child from among a group of children who are in danger of drowning even if he is better placed to save two other children. In this kind of case, we intuitively think it reasonable for the father to save his own child, even if saving the other two children would bring about better consequences. According to van Roojen, the rightness of this action does not require that the father judges that it is *the best* action. In fact, the father might even agree that it would have been better overall if he had saved the other two children, since the chances that they will benefit humanity is (we may assume) greater than that his own child will. However, as long as choosing to save his own child

<sup>28</sup> In general, there is something odd in picturing the virtuous person as someone who actually thinks that she has forgone something better when she chose to do what she knew was right. If this is really what she thinks, it would seem she also has reason to *regret* her choice. But it seems wrong to picture the virtuous person as someone who is subject to regret. If she regrets her choice, her reasons for doing what she knew was right simply cannot have succeeded in *silencing* the reasons against. Dancy rules for similar reasons out that a virtuous person can be subject to regret. See Dancy (1997, p. 50).

<sup>29</sup> A similar point has been made by Byron (1998, p. 90).

<sup>30</sup> Van Roojen (2004).

brings about consequences that are *good enough*, his choice is still justified by the non-consequentialist considerations, i.e., is *the right* thing to do.

I think there are two difficulties with this response. First, I am not convinced that non-consequentialism can allow that the reasons for doing the right action can be defeated in the face of importantly good or bad consequences, as van Roojen assumes. On the contrary, one natural thought would be that if non-consequentialism is true, the father not only does not need to think that saving his own child brings about the best consequences: he *ought not* think that saving his own child brings about *good enough* consequences. Claiming otherwise would be to give him ‘one thought too many’, to use Bernard Williams’ famous phrase, that is, it would suggest that he calculated the values of each act in terms of their consequences. But if non-consequentialism is true, the father should save his own child straightaway without any such calculation. In fact, non-consequentialism seems to require that the agent considers only a restricted range of the considerations that actually obtain in his situation.<sup>31</sup> Second, if van Roojen is correct that the satisficer’s non-consequentialist reasons actually are defeated by her consequentialist reasons, it becomes extremely difficult to explain why her choice was rational. The trouble is that he seems to lay his position open to the main charge of the sceptic, which is that genuine satisficing is rationally unmotivated. For if the satisficer actually recognizes that she has better reasons for choosing what she rejects, how can her reason for choosing what she does be *a rational* reason for choosing it? Even assuming that there is a sense in which what she does is right, e.g., virtuous, van Roojen still need to explain why it is *the rational thing* to do. While Swanton could explain this by appeal to the idea that virtuous reasons are indefeasible, i.e., that the most rational reason may not be the best reason, van Roojen, by accepting that virtuous reasons are defeasible, makes these explanatory resources unavailable. Thus, even if the morally right reason may not be the best reason on his account, it may still be the case that the best reason is the most rational reason. I find it difficult, therefore, to see why van Roojen’s account is any improvement over Swanton’s.

### 3 De Re and De Dicto Genuine Satisficing

Why does it turn out to be so difficult to justify genuine satisficing? In this section I want to suggest some general reasons why we should be sceptics about genuine satisficing. I will then consider what forms of non-maximizing rationality this leave us with.

Accounts such as Slote’s and Weber’s are based on the claim that the incommensurability of different perspectives might yield a rational permission to satisfice with respect to one of them. The trouble with this is that satisficing with respect to one of the perspectives still appears to be rationally unmotivated. Why is that? The answer, I think, is that the notion of ‘acting rationally’ is conceptually linked to the notion of acting for a reason that one takes to be better, or at least not worse, than one’s reasons for doing something else.<sup>32</sup> What would make one want to question this connection? One reason might be because one believes the fact that an agent may view the goodness of her reasons from different perspectives (temporal or whatever), shows that she also may view the rationality of her

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Williams discusses a case of a man who can save only one of several people and who chooses to save his wife, and remarks: ‘It might have been hoped by some (for instance, his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife.’ See Williams (1981, p. 18).

<sup>32</sup> For a similar point, see Schmitz (1995, 2004).

reasons from different perspectives. But this, I think, is a confusion. The notion of rationality simply does not allow for different perspectives on the rationality of one's reasons, even if it may allow for different perspectives on the goodness of those reasons. This can be brought out in the following way: that an agent has a reason to do something from a certain perspective, whether it be a temporal perspective or the perspective of a moderate person or whatever, cannot make it rational to do it if she thereby ignores another perspective she has, from which she knows that she has a reason to do something else. On the level of what makes a reason *a rational* reason, there simply is no room for different perspectives: a rational reason for choosing an option is the reason that is better, or at least not worse, than one's reasons for choosing an alternative option, and that includes one's reasons for viewing that option from an alternative perspective that gives one a reason not to choose it. Now, this does not mean that the agent cannot view the goodness of her reasons from different perspectives; she may think that as viewed from one perspective a reason she has for doing something is better than her reason for doing something else, yet as viewed from another perspective that it really does not matter what she does in this case. The important point is that in order for her reason as viewed from one of those perspectives, to be a rational ground for choice, it is not sufficient that it is good enough from that perspective: she must also have a reason for *choosing to view* her option from that perspective rather than the other perspective, and that reason must be better, or at least not worse, than whatever reasons she has for choosing to view it from the other perspective. Thus, the claim that there is no all-encompassing perspective from which the satisficer may view her reasons, amounts, I think, to abandoning the rational perspective altogether, since the rational perspective, by definition, *is* such an all-encompassing perspective.

The trouble with accounts which appeal to non-consequentialism is different. First, it should be noted that in some respects these accounts may appear more promising since if some form of non-consequentialism is the correct view of morality, it seems to follow that there is a moral permission to do other than what one believes is best in consequentialist terms.<sup>33</sup> However, the trouble is that even if this is true, it does not show that *genuine satisficing* is rational. The root of the problem for satisficing non-consequentialism is the difficulty of explaining the rationalizing role of the thought that an alternative is good enough within a non-consequentialist framework. While the notion of 'good enough' and 'best' only seem to make sense on the assumption that there is a metric in terms of which the agent's options can be ranked, satisficing non-consequentialism seems to entail that the satisficer's choice is determined independently of such a metric. But then it becomes extremely difficult to see why her choice should have anything to do with the fact that she thought her option was 'good enough'. And since a satisficer presumably chooses what she does *because* she thinks it is good enough, the upshot is that it becomes difficult to see why her behaviour deserves to be called 'satisficing'.

So, if this criticism of genuine satisficing is on the right track, where does that leave us as far as non-maximizing rationality is concerned? Let me put to one side non-maximizing behaviour that depends on the truth of non-consequentialism. What interests me here are forms of non-maximizing behaviour that deserves to be called 'satisficing'. One such form is, of course, satisficing implemented in a dynamic context as a strategy to cut down the search time for options (remember the restaurant case). What characterizes this form of satisficing is that you choose an option you judge is satisfactory or good enough even if you don't know that it is the best option. I take it that it is fairly uncontroversial that this may be a rational strategy to employ when its cost savings balances the risk of not maximizing

<sup>33</sup> See also Byron (1998, p. 90) for a similar point.

from the local perspective. Then there is the claim that there is ‘a genuine form’ of satisficing behaviour. According to this claim, a satisficer might enumerate and evaluate all the options on offer (just as the maximizer) but instead of choosing the best, might reject the best and choose the good enough option. I have argued that such behaviour is rationally unmotivated. Does this cover the whole class of satisficing behaviour, or could there be yet other forms of rational non-maximizing behaviour that deserves to be called ‘satisficing’? Note first that the main difference between dynamic and genuine satisficing is the degree of information available to the decision-maker: whereas the dynamic satisficer chooses an option she judges good enough even if she does not know whether it is the best option, the genuine satisficer chooses an option she judges good enough even if she knows of another option in her set of options that it is better. Described this way there seems to be conceptual space for yet another form of satisficing behaviour: an agent may choose an option she judges good enough even if she knows that another option in her set of options is better, but does not know *which* of these options is better.<sup>34</sup> In other words, rather than taking ‘option’ to occur *de re* in the description of genuine satisficing, we might take it to occur *de dicto*. Let us therefore call this ‘*de dicto* genuine satisficing’. Here is what might be an example: suppose Sue has inherited a large sum of money and decides that this spring break she wants to go on a really luxurious holiday abroad. So, she flicks through a large number of brochures about possible destinations and ends up with a list of five places around the globe, all of which she wants to visit. However, she finds it difficult to evaluatively rank her alternatives as there are advantages and disadvantages with each one of them. For example, while she loves Paris for its food and culture, Thailand offers the prospect of a more relaxing holiday on the beach; Dubai seems most exotic, a safari in South Africa more exciting than the other alternatives, a trip to Barcelona more fun and so on. In the end Sue realizes that if she is to get a ticket to any of these destinations for the spring break she cannot spend more time pondering which of her alternatives is the better one. So, she has to make a decision. Even if she knows that Paris is not the best of her options, she judges that going to Paris is satisfactory or good enough since this is, we may assume, the destination she is most familiar with and since she does not know which of her other options is in fact the best one. So, she chooses to go to Paris. Let’s assume for the moment that this is indeed a plausible description of Sue’s behaviour. First note that it shares features with both dynamic and genuine satisficing even if it is different from both. With dynamic satisficing it shares the feature that she uses satisficing as a stopping rule. However, since she is presented with a fixed set of options she does not use it to cut down the search time for options, i.e., the context is not dynamic in the sense that she is faced with a potentially endless search for options. Rather, she uses it as a stopping rule to cut down the time spent evaluatively ranking the options in a rather large set of available options and, in contrast with dynamic satisficing, she knows that the option she is choosing is not the best. With genuine satisficing it shares the feature that she knows there is a better option included in her set of options and that in choosing what she does she is rejecting that option. However, unlike genuine satisficing she doesn’t know *which* of her other options is the better one.

This characterization of *de dicto* genuine satisficing raises two questions. First, is it a plausible description of Sue’s behaviour? Second, if it is a plausible description, is her behaviour rationally motivated? The latter question seems the easiest to answer. If the description of Sue’s behaviour is plausible, it must be rational for similar reasons as dynamic satisficing is rational. This is because she uses satisficing as a stopping rule, although not to cut down the search time for options, but rather to cut down the time spent

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pointing this out to me.

evaluatively ranking the options in her set of options. Thus, the likely costs of further deliberation would outweigh the likely benefits of finding the best destination since she might miss her chance of getting a ticket to any of her preferred destinations. So, the cost savings of *de dicto* genuine satisficing balances the risk of not maximizing from the local perspective. The first question may seem harder to answer. Have I really provided a plausible description of Sue's behaviour? One reason to doubt that could be the following: if Sue does not know of either one of her other options that it is better than going to Paris, how can she know there is a better option than going to Paris included in her set of options? The difficulty can perhaps be put more generally as follows: is it possible to lack a piece of knowledge taken *de re* that one nevertheless possesses taken *de dicto*? Although there are complex issues arising at this point which I cannot address in any detail here, it seems plausible, I think that this is indeed possible.<sup>35</sup> Thus, to take a simple example, Sue may not know of a certain person she met at the party that he is famous, but know that the king of Sweden is famous. In fact, the person she met at the party was the king of Sweden. It follows that Sue possesses a piece of knowledge taken *de dicto* that she lacks taken *de re*. In general, sentences involving *de dicto* attitudes and sentences involving *de re* attitudes not only have different meanings, but no entailment relation appears to hold between them. It therefore seems at least conceptually possible that Sue may not know of either one of her options that it is better than going to Paris, yet know that there is a better option than going to Paris in her set of options.

One might perhaps object that, even if this conceptual possibility is granted, it is difficult to see on what *basis* she could know this, assuming that she does not know which of her other options is the better one. However, it seems plausible, I think, that if Sue has to make a quick decision and chooses Paris as satisfactory or good enough since it is the destination she feels most familiar with, she can still know that if she had had more time for further deliberation, she would have chosen a destination other than Paris because it would be better. Thus, she may know that her other options have various attractive features, e.g., that they may be more interesting in some ways, more exotic or whatever, and also know that if she had given these features the attention they deserve in her deliberation she would have chosen differently. It does not seem uncommon that we choose, under various forms of pressure, one alternative among many, while knowing in our hearts that choosing another of these alternatives would have been better overall. Yet, if we don't know *which* of our other alternatives *is* in fact the better one and believe the likely costs of further deliberation would outweigh the likely benefits of finding it out, we seem justified in choosing as we do, as long as it strikes us as good enough in the circumstances.

If this line of reasoning is sound then, *de dicto* genuine satisficing can be a form of rational satisficing behaviour. Let me still end with a note of caution. I have not offered any extensive defence of *de dicto* genuine satisficing here and am aware that further arguments are needed to do that. I believe we need a richer theory of non-maximizing behaviour in general. My aim in this paper has just been to suggest the possibility of a form of satisficing which may appear not to be covered by existing accounts of satisficing behaviour.

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of some of these difficulties, see e.g., Salmon (1997).

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