
Full Goodness and Divine Satisficing

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[This is a shorter version of my “Divine Satisficing and the Ethics of the Problem of Evil” (*Faith and Philosophy* 2020), which is available [here](#). This shorter version cuts almost 4k words out of the paper and focuses on the parts of the argument that mainstream ethicists will find most interesting.]

1. Introduction

No one expects God’s ethics to have a satisficing structure, a structure which makes it rational, in the absence of countervailing considerations, to reject the better for the good enough. Satisficing, in this narrow sense, is rarely thought to apply to human ethics.¹ It is especially controversial whether it applies to divine ethics. For an absolutely perfect God might be expected to go above and beyond the call of duty, to always choose the best in the absence of countervailing considerations.² I reject these sensible expectations. I argue that God’s ethics has a satisficing structure.

Indeed, I argue that God’s ethics has a particular satisficing structure: in the absence of countervailing considerations, God must make each creature’s life *fully good* but not necessarily maximally good. A creature’s life is fully good when, roughly, it has all the goodness that it ought to have. The notion of full goodness is crucial. It underwrites the positive arguments that I offer on behalf of satisficing. It also resolves a longstanding worry about satisficing structures. For no other account of *the good enough* is both principled and demanding enough to be good enough.

The full goodness threshold is a poorly understood feature of a familiar theistic axiology, *medieval neo-Platonism*. But the threshold is also plausible in its own right. If a complete human life contains exactly one unit of pleasure and no units of pain, then the life is bad *with respect to pleasure and pain*. This is puzzling. How can the life be *bad* with respect to pleasure and pain when the life contains some of the good thing (pleasure) and none of the bad thing (pain)? Answer: humans *ought to have* a certain amount of pleasure. Otherwise, they are deprived of pleasure and deprivation is bad. This appeal to full goodness—that humans ought to have certain amounts of pleasure—reveals that axiological reality has more structure than is commonly supposed. Satisficing is the only normative structure that matches this axiological structure.

This paper has direct relevance to the argument from evil. Standard formulations of the argument appeal to something like this conjunction:

Ethical Premise: God necessarily prevents suffering in the absence of sufficiently strong countervailing considerations, and

Empirical Premise: there exists some suffering for which God would not have a sufficiently strong countervailing consideration.

Together these premises entail that God doesn’t exist. Recent literature on the argument from evil, including the literature on skeptical theism, tends to focus on

¹ See §3 for a discussion of how this conception of satisficing relates to the broader literature.

² See, e.g., Kraay 2013: 404-405.

whether the empirical premise is true or reasonable. As Mark Murphy (2017) notes, very little argument has been provided for Ethical Premise. Murphy's (2017, 2019) own account of God's ethics rejects it.

My account of divine satisficing vindicates Ethical Premise. Maximal wellbeing is not required for full goodness, so God does not need a countervailing consideration to forgo elevating us to the greatest heights of wellbeing. Yet full goodness does require the absence of suffering, so God *does* need a countervailing consideration to allow us to descend into the depths of despair. This satisficing picture is not what we expected God's ethics to look like. It nonetheless vindicates the ethical premise in the argument from evil.

In the next section, §2, I distinguish between requiring and merely justifying reasons and explain why the former have a special role to play in the explanation of divine (in)action. I employ the requiring/merely justifying distinction in §3, where I clarify what it is for God's reasons to have a satisficing structure and distinguish that structure from its alternatives.

My arguments for divine satisficing initially assume a certain medieval neo-Platonist axiology. The concept *full goodness* is most familiar in that context (though not by that name). In addition, Murphy assumes this axiology. I give Murphy the axiology he wants and show that what follows is a satisficing structure capable of grounding the ethical premise in the argument from evil. In §4, I identify, clarify, and briefly defend the provisionally assumed neo-Platonism, as well as the notion of full goodness. In §5, I argue that God's reasons have a satisficing structure. In a nutshell, satisficing best captures the normative import of the difference between full goodness and deprivation.

After demonstrating that Murphy's neo-Platonism supports divine satisficing, I show that my arguments for divine satisficing can survive without the assumption of neo-Platonism. In §6, I explain why the essential features of my argument for divine satisficing depend only on neo-Platonism's commitment to the full goodness threshold; I show that this threshold fits comfortably in other metaethical frameworks; and I provide independent grounds for endorsing the full goodness threshold. In §7, I explain how full goodness resolves the longstanding worry that satisficing theories have no account of the good enough that is both principled and demanding enough to be good enough.

(Consult the longer version of the paper if you want further defense of the above application to the problem of evil, the paper's methodology, or the transition from full goodness to my account of divine satisficing.)

2. Two Kinds of Reasons

Reasons (for action) are things that contribute in a systematic way to a given normative status, usually (ir)rationality. Rationality is "finally authoritative in settling questions of what to do" (Darwall 1983: 215-16). With respect to God, a rational action is one that is worthy of being chosen by an absolutely perfect being. An *irrational* action is one that is *not* worthy of being chosen by such a being.³ On this

³ The labels "rationality" and "(ir)rational" do not matter. Just replace "rationality" with your favorite term for the single, comprehensive normative perspective that is finally authoritative concerning

conception of rationality, there is no gap between an action's being (divinely) rational and an action's being good enough for God. If it is rational for God to satisfice, it is possible that God satisfices. Thus, one worry about divine satisficing—that it might be rational without being good enough for God—is stymied right from the get-go.

Divine reasons, then, are things that make systematic contributions to an action's being (not) worthy of divine choice. There are two different kinds of systematic contributions that reasons can make, which track two different kinds of force they can have. It is standardly assumed that all reasons have justifying force, roughly, the capacity to make an act rational.⁴ It is less clear whether all reasons have requiring force, roughly, the capacity to make doing anything else irrational.⁵

If a reason to ϕ has requiring force, it is a **requiring reason**, i.e., a reason that both makes ϕ pro tanto rational and makes doing anything else pro tanto irrational.⁶ Requiring reasons to ϕ don't necessarily make ϕ required; rather, they necessarily make it required *in the absence of countervailing considerations*. If a reason to ϕ doesn't have requiring force, it is a **merely justifying reason**, i.e., a reason that pro tanto makes it rational to ϕ but does not make it pro tanto irrational to do something else instead.⁷ Merely justifying reasons don't necessarily make it rational to ϕ ; rather, they necessarily make it rational to ϕ *in the absence of countervailing considerations*. So understood, all reasons are either requiring (have justifying and requiring force) or merely justifying (have justifying but not requiring force).

For simplicity, I follow Murphy (2017, ch 2) in assuming that what God can (can't) do must be grounded in what God has reason to (not) do.⁸ Since all reasons are either requiring or merely justifying, it follows that what God can (can't) do must be fully accounted for by these two kinds of reasons. Merely justifying reasons have some tendency to give God discretion in one respect without limiting it in any respect. If God's reason to give you an ice cream cone is merely justifying, then, in the absence of countervailing considerations, God can give you an ice cream cone *and* God can do something else instead.

questions of what God is to do. And replace “(ir)rational” with your favorite term for what's (not) worthy of divine choice from the relevant perspective.

⁴ Horgan and Timmons (2010: 55) are the only exception to this standard assumption that I'm aware of. In order to account for what they call “meritorious supererogation”, they correctly hold that they must posit a third dimension of normative force, merit-making. They incorrectly infer that merit-making force is possible in the absence of justifying force. How can a reason have the capacity to confer merit on an act without having the capacity to make the act rational? Hint: it can't.

⁵ If something has requiring force without justifying force, I call it a *coherence constraint*. I assume that nothing provides a coherence constraint for God. When theorists claim that human beings are subject to coherence constraints, it is due to some imperfection. For example, an irrational desire to eat every rock you can find has some tendency to make it irrational to not eat the next rock without having any tendency to make it rational to eat the rock.

⁶ **Pro tanto rational** = rational in the absence of countervailing considerations. **Pro tanto irrational** = irrational in the absence of countervailing considerations.

⁷ For further clarification of requiring and justifying strength, see Gert 2016 and my 2017: 1373-1376.

⁸ As it stands, this simplifying assumption is too simple to be true but is close enough for the present purposes. The main complications won't concern us here (e.g., God's inability to make $2+2=5$ isn't grounded in what reasons God has, but something prior: what options God has). See Murphy's (2017, ch 2, sec 2.2) and Swinburne's (1993: 148-152) discussion of perfect rationality and freedom for why the simplifying assumption is plausibly on the right track.

Requiring reasons have some tendency to give God discretion in one respect and some tendency to eliminate it in every other respect. If God's reason to prevent your suffering is requiring, then in the absence of countervailing considerations, God can prevent your suffering *and* God cannot fail to do so. Consequently, requiring reasons have a special role to play in determining the scope of what God can do. In the absence of countervailing considerations, both merely justifying and requiring reasons to ϕ can explain why God can ϕ . Yet only requiring reasons can explain why God can't choose an action. If God can't let you suffer, it is because both (a) God has *requiring* reason to not let you suffer, and (b) God has no sufficiently strong countervailing considerations. To put the same point in more positive terms: if God must choose an action (if God can't choose any alternative), then God must have undefeated requiring reason to perform that action. Since Ethical Premise is a premise about what God can't do (God can't allow suffering in the absence of countervailing considerations), it assumes that God always has a *requiring* reason to prevent suffering.

3. The Structure of Divine Reasons: Three Rivals

This paper is concerned with the sort of reasons that an individual creature's wellbeing gives God to promote that wellbeing. Thus, we should set aside any reasons that God has from other sources, such as his promises or the fairness of a given distribution of wellbeing across people. We are focused solely on the sort of reasons an individual's wellbeing provides God to promote that wellbeing.

Everyone seems to agree—at least I assume—that creaturely wellbeing provides God with reasons to make a creature's life better.⁹ The debate is about what structure those reasons have. One potential structure is:

No Requiring Reasons (NRR): the wellbeing of creatures provides only merely justifying reasons to give a creature higher degrees of wellbeing.

No Requiring Reasons holds that no matter how bad a creature's life is, God has no requiring reason to make the life better. If true, NRR would refute the ethical premise in the argument from evil, which holds that God can permit suffering only if God has a countervailing consideration. NRR says that, even in the absence of countervailing considerations, God can rationally ignore suffering *no matter how bad it is*.

The second structure holds that the wellbeing of creatures has some tendency to limit what God can do, but only up to a certain point.

Satisficing Reasons (SR): God has requiring reason to promote a creature's wellbeing to at least some non-maximal degree GE; God's reason to promote a creature's wellbeing beyond GE are merely justifying.

GE is whatever degree counts as "the good enough". Below GE is not good enough and above GE is more than enough. Satisficing Reasons limits what God can do below GE, because God needs a countervailing consideration to allow a creature to have less

⁹ To deny this assumption is to deny that considerations, such as *it would be better for the creature*, provide any reason or rationale at all for God to prefer one alternative over another. Such a denial seems implausible. (Though, it seems plausible to deny that *all* God's reasons have that form). It's also worth mentioning that Ethical Premise in the argument from evil takes for granted that God always has a (requiring) reason, at the very least, to make a suffering creature better off.

wellbeing than GE. SR does not limit what God can do above GE, because God does *not* need a countervailing consideration to allow the creature to enjoy less than a maximal degree of wellbeing. The version of SR that I defend takes a stand on what GE is, namely GE = being fully good (both for the whole life and every part of it). We can call the resulting version of SR, **SR***. God has requiring reason to ensure that (parts of) lives are at least fully good—which is enough to get the argument from evil up and running—but only merely justifying reasons to ensure that (parts of) lives are even better. We’ll clarify full goodness in the next section.

The third structure is:

Just Requiring Reasons (JRR): for every higher degree of wellbeing that God could bring about, God has requiring reason to bring about that higher degree.

JRR is compatible with God’s giving a creature a suboptimal degree of wellbeing, i.e., less wellbeing than God could have given that creature. If God can make a creature’s life better than W, God still might give the creature W *if* God has a countervailing consideration, e.g., if someone’s freedom would have to be violated to give the creature more than W. The **JRR Conjunction** is JRR plus the view that sometimes there are countervailing considerations strong enough to justify giving a creature some suboptimal degree of wellbeing.¹⁰

No Requiring Reasons, Satisficing Reasons, and Just Requiring Reasons are pairwise incompatible. NRR holds that God has no requiring reasons to promote creaturely wellbeing at all. SR claims that God has requiring reason to promote creaturely wellbeing up to a certain (non-maximal) point, the good enough, and only merely justifying reason beyond that point. JRR holds that God has requiring reason to make a creature’s life better as long as God can make the creature’s life better.

Let me briefly indicate how JRR, SR(*), and NRR are related to the broader debate about satisficing. These theses are focused solely on God’s reasons to promote a certain good, namely a creature’s wellbeing. Analogs of these theses could be constructed for any good. For example, consider the value of the world and the reasons it provides God to promote that value. The value of the world might never provide a requiring reason for God to make the world better (NRR_w), it might provide a requiring reason only up to a certain point (SR_w), or it might provide a requiring reason as long as God can make the world better (JRR_w). In principle, a satisficing structure might apply to God’s reasons to promote creaturely well-being without applying to God’s reason to promote the overall value of the world.

When philosophers argue that some satisficing theory is true, they usually aim to defend little more than this claim: for some good, some agent can rationally reject the better for the less good. This claim is compatible with all three rival structures. I am using “satisficing theories” more narrowly to apply to the structure involved in SR and SR_w.¹¹ Those who defend something under the label of “satisficing theory” almost

¹⁰ The “*Just Requiring Reasons*” part of the JRR Conjunction applies only to the sort of reasons creaturely wellbeing provides God to promote that wellbeing. The JRR Conjunction is compatible with merely justifying reasons (e.g. a prerogative) serving as a countervailing consideration that makes it rational for God to choose a suboptimal degree of wellbeing.

¹¹ See my 2017: 1375-81 for a detailed clarification of this structure and how it is different from the JRR Conjunction structure, or what I there call “motivated submaximization theory”.

always have something like the JRR Conjunction structure in mind.¹² They think, for example, that God has requiring reason to make the world better as long as God can make it better; however, they add that God has some countervailing consideration that makes it all-in rational to reject better worlds for less good worlds (e.g., Langtry 2008: 74-8).

Let's return to our focus on God's reasons to promote creaturely wellbeing. Murphy clearly endorses NRR, and many others apparently do so as well.¹³ The JRR Conjunction is the standard way to account for how God can rationally reject the better for the less good. Until now, it's not clear that anyone has been foolish enough to defend SR, much less SR*. And this paper may reveal, ironically, that it is divine ethics, not human ethics, that is more apt to have a satisficing structure.

4. Medieval Neo-Platonism

4.1. Medieval Neo-Platonism and Full Goodness

I provisionally assume medieval neo-Platonism, the axiological context in which full goodness is most familiar (though not by that name). Murphy's defense of NRR relies on this axiology. I'll give him the axiology he wants and show that what follows is not NRR, but a satisficing structure capable of grounding the ethical premise in the argument from evil. I'll revisit this provisional assumption in §6.

Medieval neo-Platonism has three components.¹⁴ **First**, God is the only intrinsically good thing *in the sense that* it is the only thing that is good independently of its relation to anything else. **Second**, to the extent that a created thing is good, it is good by participation in (or resemblance with) divine goodness. To claim that creaturely wellbeing is participated goodness is to claim that its goodness consists in a certain kind of relation to *the Good*. Such a claim is compatible with creaturely wellbeing counting as necessarily and non-instrumentally good. **Third**, badness is privation, or deprivation. It is not bad for a rock that it fails to participate in God's goodness through perceiving its surroundings or experiencing pleasure. In contrast, if a human life never enjoys such things, it is to that extent a bad human life. Badness is absence of *due* goodness or perfection, absence of goodness that a thing *ought* to have. I assume that a creature's nature, function, telos, kind membership, or something of the sort determines what goods it ought to have, though no particular account is built

¹² See my 2016 for a defense of these claims regarding divine ethics and my 2017 for a defense of these claims regarding human ethics.

¹³ See Murphy 2019 and 2017, ch 4. A number of other philosophers would find NRR very attractive, if they were to agree that the simplifying assumption from §2 is on the right track. Historically, these philosophers include Aquinas (Davies 2006, especially ch 4 and the appendix; cf. Murphy ch 4, sec 4.4) and Duns Scotus (M Adams 1987). In the contemporary scene, this includes M Adams (1987, especially pg 500; 1999, e.g. 64); Davies (2006, especially ch 4 and the appendix); and Rubio (2018: 3002-3). Davies (2006: 215-219) explicitly rejects the idea that God acts on reasons, but he builds more into the notion of God's acting on a reason than I do.

¹⁴ It has been endorsed by Aquinas and Suárez (Newlands 2014: 283-285); as well as Murphy (2017, especially chapter 4). R Adams (1999, especially chapter 1 and pgs 103-104) is a close enough fit for my purposes. In the longer version of the paper, I explain why his alleged counterexamples seem to misunderstand the third component.

into neo-Platonism.¹⁵ (The label “medieval neo-Platonism” may be misleading insofar as the third component has obvious affinities with neo-Aristotelian accounts of what’s good/bad for a creature.)

Note that the privative view is distinct from the Augustinian claim that badness is a mere absence of good (Newlands 2014). The language of *due* and *ought* is essential. The absence of some additional good, even some additional fitting good, is not necessarily bad for the creature. Nor does it suffice for the deprivation of the creature. Einstein could have been a little smarter, which would have “fit” his human nature, but he wasn’t deprived with respect to intelligence. **Deprivation** for a creature is absence of a good that the creature is *due* or *ought* to have.

Full goodness is the opposite of deprivation. A creature’s life (in some respect) is **fully good** iff there is some goodness it ought to have and it has all the goodness it ought to have (in that respect). A fully good life would be “self-sufficient” in Aristotle’s sense, at least insofar as it would be a life that is “desirable and lacking in nothing” (Bk I.7). Such a life has no badness for the creature, because it has no deprivation.

Full goodness (in some respect) will rarely, if ever, require maximal goodness (in that respect). Human beings ought to have some degree of intelligence, but a human being isn’t deprived if she fails to be three times smarter than Einstein. Perhaps a human being ought to have at least one unit of pleasure each moment. More pleasure is presumably better, but a human being is not deprived if she fails to have an infinite amount of pleasure each moment. Consequently, some fully good lives are better than others. A fully good life with 10 units of pleasure per moment is better, other things being equal, than a fully good life with 1 unit per moment.¹⁶

According to my version of Satisficing Reasons, SR*, full goodness sets the threshold for the good enough. God has requiring reason to make each creature’s life (in every respect) fully good, but only merely justifying reasons to make it even better. For example, God has requiring reason to give human beings whatever degree of

¹⁵ I also assume that God has, at most, limited voluntary control over what goods a creature ought to have. God can’t make it false that human beings ought to have pleasure or friendships any more than God can make it false that $2+2=4$ or that torturing humans for fun is morally wrong.

¹⁶ Some non-fully good lives, or lives with some deprivation, are also better than some fully good ones. Consider a fully good life. Now consider a second life exactly the same except that it contains both a painful pinprick and 1,000 additional units of pleasure. The latter seems better despite having some deprivation. This possibility raises a question for my satisficing view. I hold that God needs a countervailing consideration to prefer a non-fully good life over a fully good one. But what if the non-fully good life is better than the fully good one? In that case, the greater quality of the non-fully good life seems to justify God in choosing it. God doesn’t need a countervailing consideration to forgo additional good beyond full goodness. God does need a countervailing consideration to allow deprivation into a life. Yet the high quality of the creature’s life can itself provide the needed countervailing consideration, at least in cases in which the non-fully good life is better than the fully good alternatives. And it goes without saying that my satisficing view (and its rivals, NRR and JRR) allow that God might have countervailing considerations grounded in something besides wellbeing that affect his reasons to give a creature a certain amount of wellbeing (fairness of welfare distributions across people, past promises, etc.).

intelligence is required for full goodness and only merely justifying reason to give a human being more than this degree of intelligence.¹⁷

In the next sub-section, I clarify the features of the third component that are most central to my arguments for SR*. The third component entails the controversial claim that *all* bads are privative.¹⁸ My appeal to the full goodness threshold doesn't require this controversial assumption (see, e.g., n22).

4.2. Medieval Neo-Platonism and the Structure of Axiological Reality

A natural assumption is that axiological reality is structured solely by which goods (bads) exist and whether things are better, worse, or equally good with respect to those goods (bads). Chang (2002) objects that this natural assumption fails to capture all true quantitative comparisons. She introduces a fourth comparative. A might be comparable to B even though A isn't better than, worse than, or equally good as B. For A and B might be *on a par*.

Like Chang, the proponent of full goodness holds that the natural assumption fails to capture all the structure in axiological reality. In contrast to Chang, the proponent of full goodness is *not* adding another comparative and is *not* concerned with enriching the structure of quantitative comparisons. The full goodness threshold is qualitative. Every 50 unit increase of pleasure might be *equally good*, but not every failure to acquire 50 units of pleasure counts as deprivation. Indeed, 10 units of pleasure for you is *less valuable* than 100 units of pleasure for me. Yet if my life is already full of pleasure and yours isn't, then you might be deprived by missing out on those 10 units even though I won't be deprived by missing out on those 100 units. Human beings can be better, worse, equally good, and perhaps on a par in various respects; however, they also "have to have" certain goods in certain amounts. Or, in the more common parlance, there are certain goods human beings *ought* to have or are *due*.¹⁹

"Ought" and "due" have different connotations, but they both pick out something like an axiological—rather than a normative—requirement. (Actually, they often pick out a *pro tanto* axiological requirement, but we can ignore this refinement until the next section.) Such things are sometimes referred to as "impersonal oughts", or what something ought to be, in contrast to "personal oughts", or what one ought *to do*.²⁰

Some philosophers may reject the existence of impersonal oughts, and so may reject the particular way in which full goodness enriches axiological reality. In §6, I provide an argument for the full goodness threshold that is independent of neo-Platonism. That argument just is an argument that there are impersonal oughts associated with the goods a human ought to have.

¹⁷ For simplicity, I assume that, if a creature ought to have some degree of a good (e.g. intelligence), it is *always* better for the creature to have more of that good. All I really need for a satisficing picture is that it is *sometimes* better to have more of that good beyond what is due.

¹⁸ Pain is an alleged counterexample. See, e.g., Adams (1999: 103) and Swenson (2009).

¹⁹ If you aren't convinced yet that the full goodness threshold is qualitative rather than quantitative, we can anticipate the discussion in §6. Simple hedonists claim that there is only one bad, pain. The proponent of full goodness objects that there is a distinct kind of bad, not reducible to pain, namely the failure to have all the pleasure that one ought to have. Which bads exist seems to be a qualitative, not a quantitative, issue.

²⁰ Sometimes philosophers use "ought" to refer to ideals rather than requirements. But in this paper I am concerned with the requirement sense of "ought," whether personal or impersonal.

The third component, in my hands anyway, treats this additional axiological structure in a typical functionalist way, using three concepts that are defined in terms of each other. Something is *deprived* when it doesn't have all the goods it ought to have (is due). The goods it is *ought to have (is due)* are those goods it is deprived without. Something is *fully good* iff it has all the goods it ought to have (and there are goods it ought to have).²¹ So these three concepts are a package deal: nothing can be deprived unless it can be fully good and there are some goods it ought to have (is due).²² To be deprived is to be deprived *of something*. It is to be deprived of full goodness, of some goods that you ought to have.

These functionalist definitions would leave you in the dark if you didn't already have some independent grip on at least one of the terms. But I'm betting you have an independent grip on both *deprivation* and *the goods a thing is due or ought to have*. You recognize that an absence of sight is deprivation, but an absence of omniscience is not. You recognize that sight is something that a human being *ought to have or is due*, and omniscience is not. We recognize, in other words, that humans are (pro tanto) axiologically required to have sight but not omniscience. (Full goodness has natural affinities with Aristotelian eudaimonia. They may be equivalent if both: a life that achieves eudaimonia is *qualitatively* better than a life that falls just short *and* some lives with eudaimonia can be better than others.)

For now, I ask that you assume the full details of medieval neo-Platonism. This will allow us to see that Murphy's axiology leads to SR* rather than his NRR. I'll then argue that you should endorse the additional axiological structure presupposed by deprivation and full goodness, even if you reject medieval neo-Platonism.

5. Medieval Neo-Platonism and Divine Reasons

5.1. The Normative-Axiological Criterion and the Three Rivals

We intuitively apply what I call the *normative-axiological fit criterion*. The basic idea is that, other things equal, an overall ethical theory is better to the extent that its

²¹ While I argue in this paper that full goodness is the good enough, they are conceptually distinct. *Full goodness* is what marks when a creature has all the goodness that it ought to have. The *good enough* is what marks when the requiring reasons to promote the good become merely justifying reasons to promote the good. The former is a meta-axiological concept, one that concerns the structure of the good. The latter is a normative concept, linking the good to reasons for action. My argument for SR* below is roughly that once you hold that the meta-axiological concept (full goodness) applies to creatures, you are committed to holding that the normative concept (good enough) applies to the reasons of a divine agent.

²² A caveat may be needed if we allow that some badness is non-privative (i.e., if we reject the full details of the third component) and also hold on to the full goodness threshold. In such a case, perhaps something can be deprived even if it has all the goods it ought to have, because it has some bads that it ought not have (is due not to have). Yet here again the *ought to have* is important. Not all bads would be deprivations. The grotesque appearance of one's internal organs is no deprivation of the aesthetic goodness one ought to have, but the grotesque appearance of one's face arguably would be. Just as we need to distinguish between those absences of goods which are deprivations and those that aren't, we must distinguish between those bads that are deprivations and those that aren't. Thus, we'll need to revise our functionalist definitions as follows. Something is *deprived* iff it doesn't have all the goods it ought to have *or* it has some bads it ought not have. The *goods it ought to have* are those goods it is deprived without. Those *bads it ought not have* are those bads it is deprived if it has. Something is *fully good* iff it has all the goods it ought to have and none of the bads it ought not have (and there are some goods it ought to have or some bads that it ought not have).

normative and axiological components cohere. We expect (absence of) qualitative axiological difference to be matched by (absence of) normative qualitative difference. Suppose that a theorist said that only persons had a special axiological status, dignity. We expect this special axiological status to have normative implications, e.g., perhaps it provides reasons to respect persons that we don't have to respect non-persons.²³

JRR is entailed by maximizing act utilitarianism (among other normative theories). Yet even when folks abandon such views they retain JRR. To the extent that there is any direct argument for JRR, it may be little more than an appeal to the normative-axiological fit criterion. It seems that there is requiring reason to make a life better than just barely good. If beyond the barely good there's just *varying degrees of even better*, then there is no qualitative axiological difference between the varying degrees of betterness. Since there is an absence of qualitative axiological difference, there is an absence of qualitative normative difference. In other words, there is no principled axiological threshold to mark where requiring reasons to promote wellbeing become merely justifying reasons to promote wellbeing. And thus JRR is true: it must be requiring reasons all the way up.

The normative-axiological fit criterion might even make NRR seem attractive. On the relevant neo-Platonism, all goodness in the world is ultimately God's goodness and badness is ultimately explained in terms of God's goodness. If you have an intuition that God has complete discretion over how his goodness is exemplified in a creature's life when the life is already great, it may seem that there is no axiological joint, no qualitative difference between the best life and the worst life. The creature just has more or less of God's goodness. And if there is no qualitative axiological difference, NRR must be true: it must be merely justifying reasons all the way down.

JRR and NRR treat the normative significance of wellbeing in a uniform manner: it is either requiring reasons all the way up (JRR) or merely justifying reasons all the way down (NRR). Whether this normative uniformity is correct depends on how uniform axiological reality is. If medieval neo-Platonism is true, axiological reality has more structure (so less uniformity) than is commonly supposed. There is a qualitative difference between the goods that are axiologically required and those that aren't, between the goodness a thing ought to have and the goodness that goes beyond that point (§4.2). (The above possible rationale for NRR misses the additional axiological structure posited by neo-Platonism.)

5.2. *A Tale of Two Oughts*

My argument for SR* is, in effect, an attempt to help you see for yourself that the normative-axiological fit criterion supports SR*, given medieval neo-Platonism's full goodness threshold. According to medieval neo-Platonism, a difference between goodness and badness concerns a difference in impersonal ought claims. When a creature's life is bad (in some respect), its life ought to be better (in that respect). When a creature's life is already as good as it ought to be (in some respect), it's *false* that the creature's life ought to be better (in that respect). (Some of you are suspicious of impersonal oughts. But I provide an argument for the full goodness threshold in §6 that just is an argument that there exist impersonal oughts.)

²³ I defend the normative-axiological fit criterion at greater length in the longer version of the paper.

Intuitively, there is a deep connection between impersonal *ought to be* facts and personal *ought to do* facts (cf. Feldman 1986: 192).²⁴ The nature of the connection will depend on the sort of ought facts at issue. Here we are concerned with *ought to be* facts which involve solely a creature's wellbeing (in some respect) and specifically with whether a creature's life is deprived (in that respect). This isn't an all-in, or all things considered, ought to be fact. It is a pro tanto one: *insofar as the wellbeing of the creature is concerned*, the creature's life ought to be better. At most, then, we should expect this sort of *ought to be* fact to ground a pro tanto *ought to do* fact.²⁵

If an agent (all-in) ought to ϕ , then both it is rational for the agent to ϕ and it is irrational for the agent to not ϕ . If an agent *pro tanto* ought to ϕ , then both it is *pro tanto* rational for the agent to ϕ and it is *pro tanto* irrational for the agent to not ϕ . Recall from §2 that only requiring reasons are in the business of making things irrational. Thus, both all-in and pro tanto ought to dos are grounded in requiring reasons. Requiring reasons ground pro tanto ought to dos *whether or not* there are countervailing considerations. They ground all-in ought to dos *in the absence of* countervailing considerations. I propose, therefore, the following connection between the relevant sort of ought to be fact and requiring reasons: if a creature's life ought to be better (in some respect), then God has a requiring reason to make that creature's life better (in that respect).

Our dialectical context needs to be kept in mind. We are assuming that creaturely wellbeing provides God with reasons to promote wellbeing. The debate is about what structure those reasons have. NRR, JRR, and SR are rival accounts of this structure. If axiological reality were as uniform as it is ordinarily taken to be, then JRR or NRR would fare better on the normative-axiological criterion than SR*. For SR* would draw qualitative normative distinctions in the absence of qualitative axiological distinctions. Yet we are (provisionally) assuming neo-Platonism. We are assuming that axiological reality is divided between the goods that a creature ought to have and those it's false that the creature ought to have. Only SR* has a normative structure that matches this axiological divide.

The normative uniformity of JRR and NRR leads them to treat different cases similarly, and this commits them to awkward conjunctions. These awkward conjunctions call out for explanation. JRR holds that, insofar as the wellbeing of the creature is concerned, God ought to make a creature's life better even if it's false that the creature's life ought to be better. But why should concern for a creature pro tanto require God to make the creature's life better, when the creature's life is already as good as it ought to be? NRR says that, insofar as the wellbeing of the creature is concerned, it's false that God ought to make a creature's life better even if it's true that the creature's life ought to be better. But why shouldn't a creature's life pro tanto

²⁴ Feldman cannot find any way of linking ought to be and ought to do that both is genuine and of "any crucial significance to normative ethics" (196). I'm going to show that neo-Platonism makes one way of linking them significant enough for divine normative ethics that it vindicates the ethical premise in the argument from evil.

²⁵ I take this pro tanto ought to be to be internal to wellbeing and independent of whether some suffering is deserved or demanded by justice. Just suffering is still deprivation. It may be good that a villain suffer the badness of extreme pain, but the extreme pain is still bad, it is still a deprivation. The possibility of just deprivation provides a potential way in which an *ought to be better insofar as the creature's wellbeing is concerned* might fail to be an *all things considered ought to be better*.

require God to make the creature's life better when the life isn't as good as it ought to be? The problem for JRR and NRR is that we expect qualitative axiological difference to correlate with qualitative normative difference.

In contrast, SR* says that God has requiring reason to make a creature's life better exactly when the creature's life ought to be better. That's satisfying; it doesn't call out for explanation in the way that JRR and NRR's awkward conjunctions do. We expect there to be a deep connection between the relevant sort of *ought to be* facts and God's requiring reasons. Only SR* vindicates this expectation. Only SR* has a normative structure that matches neo-Platonism's axiological structure.

NRR and JRR do have one trick up their sleeve. They might try to capture the asymmetry between neo-Platonic goodness and badness in a purely quantitative way. For example, the proponent of JRR might say that while the prospect of a better life always has requiring strength, it has precipitously less requiring strength when the life is already fully good, when it already lacks nothing. The problem is that SR* gives us an even tighter fit between our normative and axiological theories. The difference between *its being true that a life ought to be better* and *its being false that it ought to be better* is qualitative. A normative ethical theory fits better with neo-Platonism to the extent that it matches these qualitative differences at the axiological level with qualitative differences at the normative one. Only SR* provides such a tight fit.²⁶

6. Full Goodness without Neo-Platonism

The above argument for SR relied only on the third component of neo-Platonism. (In the longer version, I give a second argument that relies on all three components.) The third part of neo-Platonism is separable from the first two. Nothing is particularly theistic or Platonic about the claim that some badness (for a creature) is deprivation. A naturalistic Aristotelian approach could accept that badness for a creature is deprivation of goods that a creature ought to have. So could a non-theistic non-naturalism about ethics, especially one that allows kind membership to play important normative roles (e.g., FitzPatrick 2018). Thus, there is some reason to expect that my arguments for SR* can stand without relying on theistic, neo-Platonic approaches to axiology. Of course, even if other metaethical frameworks can make room for the full goodness threshold, it doesn't follow that we should make room for it. If we don't already endorse medieval neo-Platonism, why should we take the full goodness threshold seriously?

To say that full goodness exists for some creature is to say that there are some goods that the creature is due or that it ought to have. To see the plausibility of this claim, consider Singleton, a human whose life has one unit of pleasure and no units of pain. Intuitively, that's a very bad human life. Indeed, it seems to be a very bad life *with respect to pleasure and pain*. Without appealing to full goodness, it is hard to explain these intuitive judgments.

²⁶ JRR and NRR might imitate SR*'s normative implications with the help of countervailing considerations. For example, let *NRR*⁺ be the conjunction of NRR with the claim that *the creature has all the good it ought to have* counts as a countervailing reason against giving the creature more. If that's the way you want to roll, feel free. Such a view will share SR*'s key implications for atheistic arguments: it vindicates the ethical premise in the problem of evil and undermines any assumption that God would choose the best. But why bother with the extra complication of countervailing considerations when SR* can do the same work without them?

Simple hedonism claims that intrinsic goodness in a life is just pleasure and intrinsic badness is just pain, and that's all there is to it. This view can explain why Singleton's life is only *barely* good (it has only one net unit of intrinsic value). Yet it denies that the life contains any intrinsic badness; therefore, it can't explain how the life is (intrinsically) bad, nor how it is (intrinsically) bad with respect to pleasure and pain.²⁷ A simple objective list theorist may point out that the life lacks friendships or whatever. But the lack of friendships cannot explain how a life can be bad *with respect to pleasure and pain*. The full goodness threshold seems to capture our intuitive evaluation of that life: it is a bad life precisely because human lives ought to have more pleasure.²⁸

Full goodness is a meta-axiological notion. It takes no stand on what the direct contributors to wellbeing are. Maybe it is just pleasure/pain, in which case hedonism can be salvaged by allowing that there are two ways for a life to be bad in itself: having pain and not having all the pleasure it ought to have. We could call such a view *full goodness hedonism* to contrast it with simple hedonism. Or maybe the direct contributors are given by some sort of objective or hybrid list (as I sometimes suppose for the sake of illustrations). The proponent of the full goodness threshold is committed solely to the claim that some of the goods that contribute to wellbeing are goods that the creature *ought* to have or are *due* to the creature.²⁹ Singleton's life shows us that the full goodness threshold is plausible in its own right. As a human being, it seems that there are certain amounts of pleasure that we are due or ought to have and that we are deprived when our pleasure falls short.

Recall that full goodness falls short of maximal goodness. We might be due at least one unit of pleasure each moment, but we aren't due a trillion units each moment. It is this feature of full goodness that grounds the above arguments for satisficing whether medieval neo-Platonism is true or not.

7. Full Goodness and the Good Enough

One worry about satisficing theories is that there is no adequate way to specify what degree of the good is *good enough*, the threshold that determines when one's requiring reasons to promote the good become merely justifying reasons to promote the good (cf. Rubio 2018: 3001). On the one hand, we want the cut-off to be principled. It should track something qualitative. On the other, we want the threshold to be "demanding enough": it must be plausible that God has only merely justifying

²⁷ More formally, the inference is as follows:

1. If simple hedonism is true, then Singleton's life is bad in itself (bad with respect to Singleton's pleasure and pain) only if it has some pain. [definition of simple hedonism]
2. Singleton's life doesn't have any pain in it. [stipulation of case]
3. Therefore, if Simple Hedonism is true, then Singleton's life isn't bad in itself (or bad with respect to pleasure and pain).
4. But Singleton's life is bad in itself (bad with respect to pleasure and pain).
5. Therefore, simple hedonism is false.

²⁸ The full goodness threshold might also be helpful for cashing out welfare prioritarianism and/or noncomparative harming; however, I'll have to explore these connections on another occasion.

²⁹ Again, the full goodness threshold is logically weaker than medieval neo-Platonism's third component: only the latter entails that *all* bads (for a creature) are privative. Also, please remember the caveat from [n22](#).

reasons to make one better off than the proposed threshold. It is difficult to satisfy both criteria at once.

Consider a view that lets *being good* serve as the good enough: God has requiring reason to make a life at least barely good and merely justifying reason to make it even better. The threshold seems principled. At first glance, there seems to be a qualitative difference between a life that is at least barely good and one that is not. Yet the threshold also seems insufficiently demanding. The Repugnant Conclusion seems repugnant for this very reason. In the absence of countervailing considerations, God must do more than ensure that people's lives are at least barely worth living. Suppose instead that we let *flourishing* serve as the good enough. This cut-off is arguably demanding enough, but it doesn't seem principled. In the abstract, the difference between one's having a good life and one's having a flourishing life seems to be a difference of mere degree.

Satisficing Reasons* offers an account of the good enough that is both principled and sufficiently demanding. It holds that God has requiring reason to ensure that each creature's life is fully good (in every respect), but only merely justifying reason to ensure that the creature's life is even better (in that respect). The full goodness threshold is principled, because there is a qualitative difference between a life (or part's) being deprived and its having all the goodness it is due, all the goodness it ought to have (§4.2).

The full goodness threshold will also be plenty demanding. We aren't due omniscience, but maybe most of us are due more intelligence than we actually have. We aren't due infinite amounts of pleasure each moment, but maybe we are often due more than we are getting. Imagine a human whose whole life and every part lacks nothing: it has every bit of pleasure, intelligence, power, friendships, and accomplishments that it ought to have. The worst fully good life is a pretty awesome life.

Proponents of JRR, of course, won't find any threshold demanding enough, short of the best that God can do. Their objection is to (divine) satisficing theory as such. This is not the place for a complete defense of satisficing theory (I do much of that in my 2017). I have shown that, as long as divine satisficing theory isn't ruled out, SR*'s full goodness threshold is both principled and demanding enough. This is an accomplishment, as no other candidate for the *good enough* clearly satisfies both criteria.

Conclusion

Once a satisficing structure is clearly distinguished from what I called the JRR Conjunction, it seems that no one has previously argued that divine ethics has a satisficing structure. Nonetheless, I've argued that divine ethics has a particular satisficing structure, SR*: God has requiring reason to make a creature's life and every part of it fully good, but only merely justifying reasons to make it even better.

My argument for SR* assumes that human lives can be fully good. This threshold implies that axiological reality is structured by an impersonal ought, whether a life is as good as it ought to be. The normative-axiological fit criterion tells us that normative structures should match axiological structures. Only SR* has a normative structure that matches the full goodness threshold. Thus, only it respects an intuitive connection

between whether a creature's life ought to be better and whether God ought to make it better.

The full goodness threshold emerged as an important contribution for both satisficing theory and meta-axiology. For satisficing theory, it grounded the arguments for divine satisficing and resolved the longstanding worry that there is no account of the good enough that is both principled and demanding enough to be good enough. For meta-axiology, it explains how a life with only pleasure and no pain can be bad *with respect to pleasure and pain*.³⁰

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