

# MASTER'S THESIS EXAMINER REPORT

*IEPS – International Economic and Political Studies*

*Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University*

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Thesis title:</b>   | <b>Borderline duties and fuzzy values: An analysis of vagueness in ethics</b> |
| <b>Student's name:</b> | <b>Marti Bridgewater Mateu</b>  |
| <b>Referee's name:</b> | <b>Prof. Vuko Andrić</b>  |

| Criteria              | Definition  | Maximum    | Points |
|-----------------------|---|------------|--------|
| <b>Major Criteria</b> |   |            |        |
|                       | Contribution and argument (quality of research and analysis, originality) | <b>50</b>  | 50     |
|                       | Research question (definition of objectives, plausibility of hypotheses)  | <b>15</b>  | 15     |
|                       | Theoretical framework (methods relevant to the research question)         | <b>15</b>  | 15     |
| <b>Total</b>          |   | <b>80</b>  | 80     |
| <b>Minor Criteria</b> |   |            |        |
|                       | Sources, literature   | <b>10</b>  | 10     |
|                       | Presentation (language, style, cohesion)                                  | <b>5</b>   | 5      |
|                       | Manuscript form (structure, logical coherence, layout, tables, figures)   | <b>5</b>   | 5      |
| <b>Total</b>          |   | <b>20</b>  | 20     |
| <b>TOTAL</b>          |   | <b>100</b> | 100    |

**Plagiarism-check (URKUND) match score: 1%**

**Reviewer's commentary according to the above criteria** (min. 1800 characters including spaces when recommending a passing grade, min. 2500 characters including spaces when recommending a failing grade):

The thesis contributes in an original way to the over-demanding objection in the literature on act-consequentialism by applying views about vagueness to the debate over maximizing, satisficing, and scalar act-consequentialism. I am not aware of any previous such application in the literature.

According to the over-demandingness objection, maximizing act-consequentialism is too demanding a moral theory, and hence implausible, because maximizing act-consequentialism classifies actions as obligatory that, despite being better than their alternatives, would be merely permissible (rather than obligatory) according to our considered moral judgements, thus leaving no space for supererogation. Satisficing act-consequentialism claims that actions are permissible if they are "good enough", where the threshold for being good enough is met by some actions with suboptimal consequences. Scalar consequentialism rejects the deontic concepts related to moral duties altogether, assessing actions merely in terms of value and moral reasons.

The thesis applies views from the literature on vagueness – e.g., epistemicism and supervaluationism – to the debate over maximizing, satisficing, and scalar act-consequentialism. It explains plausibly

why some of the resulting combinations are more promising than others. The thesis does not claim that there is a unique and clear “winning” combination. But that is not a shortcoming. The thesis is meant to show that the literature on vagueness can fruitfully be applied to the debate on the over-demandingness objection without, however, making arguments from, and further research in, the latter debate redundant. The thesis fully succeeds in its aspirations.

The thesis’s original contribution is conducted in a careful way in that no unwarranted conclusions are drawn. Moreover, the thesis displays conscientiousness by being perfectly clear on central concepts, deploying easy-to-follow formalizations, and indicating which aspects could be discussed in more detail. The arguments are carefully spelled out and all the relevant literature about the main topic is referenced and used, even some very recent and accordingly not well known publications, and the positions are presented correctly.

The writing style is excellent. Regarding both the presentation of the relevant positions and the development and display of its original arguments, the thesis succeeds in being precise and accessible at the same time. This is a major achievement, especially when the topic is as theoretical as the two debates with which the thesis is concerned. But that is not all that should be said regarding the writing style, as the thesis is also an enjoyable read. This is often due to succinct formulations and the choice of entertaining – and yet perfectly fitting – examples.

The structure is very clear. The first section presents, and analyses, the over-demandingness objection as it pertains to maximizing, satisficing, and scalar act-consequentialism. The second section lays out, in a very accessible way, some major views on the issue of vagueness. The third section applies the views on vagueness to the debate on maximizing, satisficing, and scalar consequentialism.

**Proposed grade (A-B-C-D-E-F): A**

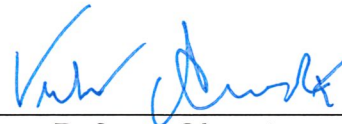
**Suggested questions for the defence are:**

- 1) In the conclusion you write: “At a more specific level, I hope it is clear to see that maximising consequentialism is, by far, the view in ethics that is most clearly undermined if this reframing in terms of vagueness is taken onboard. In a nutshell, the best thing one can do is not the only thing one may morally do in the same way that not only the tallest person is tall. There is good reason why no theory of vagueness has been attempted along these lines, whereas richer parallels do seem to exist between the main approaches to vagueness and non-maximising views on permissibility that have been endogenously developed in moral philosophy.” But you also explain, in section 3.1 and 3.2, that combinations of satisficing or scalar consequentialism with certain views about vagueness run into problems, too. Why is the problem for maximizing consequentialism more serious than these problems?
- 2) Why is the problem of risk that you lay out on pages 36–7 for epistemicist satisficing consequentialism worse than the epistemic problem of objective maximizing consequentialism that you cannot know the consequences of your actions (i.e., the problem of *cognitive* over-demandingness)? – To elaborate, you explain that even an agent who is fully informed about the (non-moral) facts would be exposed to the problem of risk on epistemicist satisficing consequentialism. But why is this problem worse or more serious than being risking wrong actions due to lack of factual knowledge on objective maximizing consequentialism?
- 3) You write on page 19: “I suspect the notions of moral permissibility and obligation may in some sense be more-or-less dead theological metaphors about penal arrangements in the afterlife. A suggestive historical comparison might be that of the concept of “sin”: whereas it once was at the very core of moral philosophy (Dawson, 2019), most philosophers today would likely treat it as interesting historically, but as conceptual deadweight for lucid and truth-conducive ethical analysis: any legitimate theoretical functions that the concept may

have carried out in the past are translatable into more secular and clearly defined concepts, and more specifically theological implications can be rightly cast aside. Although such accounts might contribute to motivate and mitigate the cost of getting rid of traditional deontic categories, they are unfortunately well beyond the scope of this paper.” If the notions of moral permissibility and obligation are indeed dead theological metaphors, is normative ethical theorizing, such as in your thesis, intellectually defensible? Why?

- 4) The threshold posited by satisficing consequentialism for permissible actions does not seem to take into account the costs to the agent. But shouldn't this kind of threshold be sensitive to the costs to the agent? Why? If so, could satisficing consequentialism be revised so as to take the costs to the agent into account? If so, would that have implications regarding the prospects of combining satisficing consequentialism with epistemicism?

I ~~(do not)~~ recommend the thesis for final defence.



**Referee Signature**

Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:

| TOTAL POINTS | GRADE | Quality standard                                      |
|--------------|-------|---|
| 91 – 100     | A     | = outstanding (high honor)                            |
| 81 – 90      | B     | = superior (honor)                                    |
| 71 – 80      | C     | = good  |
| 61 – 70      | D     | = satisfactory  |
| 51 – 60      | E     | = low pass at a margin of failure                     |
| 0 – 50       | F     | = failing. The thesis is not recommended for defence. |