Should We Blow Up a Pipeline? Ecotage as Other-Defense

Note: this is the penultimate draft of Arridge, A.S., "Should We Blow Up a Pipeline? Ecotage as Other-Defense", *Environmental Ethics,* Volume 45, Number 3 (Fall 2023): 315–338

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Abstract

Ecotage, or the destruction of property for the sake of promoting environmental ends, is beginning to (re)establish itself both as a topic of public discussion and as a radical activist tactic. In response to these developments, a small but growing academic literature questions whether, and if so under what conditions, ecotage can be morally justified. This paper contributes to the literature by arguing that instances of ecotage are *pro tanto* justified insofar as they are instances of effective and proportionate self- and/or other-defense. Having elucidated and defended its central claim, this paper concludes by briefly considering some other morally relevant features of ecotage that might tell for or against its *overall* justification in particular cases.

1. Introduction

Ecotage is the intentional destruction of property conducted with the aim of furthering environmental ends. Acts of this kind briefly enjoyed a moment in the media spotlight when the Earth Liberation Front, a US environmentalist group, burned down a ski lift in protest of its ecological impact in 1998 (Dejevsky 1998). Earth First!'s organized campaign of tree-spiking (inserting metal or porcelain spikes into trees with the aim of damaging sawmill blades) also received considerable public attention (Vanderheiden 2008: 302, Vanderheiden 2005: 440–441, Vanderheiden 2008: 302). Since then,

however, ecotage has been largely absent from the public gaze.[1] This is perhaps because there has not been all that much ecotage for the public gaze to land on: most prominent environmentalist groups in Europe and the United States are strongly committed to the activist tactics of mass protest and civil disobedience, and eschew *any* form of violent action, including the kind of violence against property that characterizes ecotage.[2]

More recently, however, there has been an uptick in ecotage's public profile, largely due to the publication of Andreas Malm's *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* and the release of a fictionalized film adaptation of the same name.[3] Moreover, *some* activist groups have engaged in small-scale acts of ecotage, e.g. Greenpeace dropped heavy boulders into busy fishing grounds to damage trawlers' nets (Harvey 2022).[4] The fact that ecotage has not been a bigger part of the contemporary climate movement, however, is surprising. Sabotage was widely employed by the radical flanks of many of the twentieth century's most prominent social movements, including first wave feminism, the anti-apartheid struggle, and the civil rights movement (Malm 2021). Given that climate breakdown is (arguably) as urgent an injustice as those targeted by these prior

[1] Despite this lack of attention, there have been numerous, recent instances of sabotage being used as an activist or guerrilla tool outside of Europe and the United States: two such examples include the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)'s destruction of oil infrastructure in Nigeria (Hazen and Horner 2007) and similar actions by Colombia's ELN resistance fighters (Griffin 2021). Although sabotage, it is not clear whether (or to what extent) these acts qualify as *ecotage*: whether they do will depend on whether these groups' intentions included the promotion of "environmental ends." I will not discuss these cases further, but will discuss what qualifies as an environmental end in §1.1.

[2] Extinction Rebellion (XR), for example, espouses non-violence as one of its ten core "principles and values" (Extinction Rebellion n.d.).

[3] Malm (2021) and *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (2022). Earlier examples of ecotage in popular culture include Edward Abbey's (2006) novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and Benedikt Erlingsson's (2018) film *Woman at War*.

[4] Note the recent spate of art vandalism by environmentalist groups such as Just Stop Oil in the UK and Letzte Generation in Germany (see Jones 2022) fails to qualify as ecotage given no property was *destroyed* in the actions involved: the artworks targeted were protected by glass and survived unscathed. To qualify as *ecotage* these acts would, at the very least, have had intentionally to *destroy* some piece of property; I say more about property destruction in §1.1.

movements, the question looms: Why has the climate movement not spawned a radical wing engaged in ecotage (Cf. Butler 2021)?

Perhaps we should expect it will: as the time remaining to solve the climate crisis grows ever shorter, and the activist tool of non-violent civil disobedience proves itself ever more incapable *on its own* of forcing a solution to the climate crisis, ecotage may become a more prominent part of the radical climate movement. This makes the task of thinking about the *morality* of ecotage both urgent and important.

In (partial) answer to this task, this paper is structured as follows. The remainder of §1 clarifies my definition of ecotage and situates my argument in the literature. §2 then presents a formalized version of my argument, concluding with the claim that instances of ecotage are *pro tanto* justified insofar as they are instances of effective and proportionate self- and/or other-defense.[5] §3–5 then elucidate and defend this argument step by step, showing its conclusion to be sound. §6 ventures some brief remarks on when instances of ecotage may be *overall* justified, by considering other morally relevant features of these acts that bear on their justification. §7 concludes.

1.1. Defining Ecotage

Ecotage is the intentional destruction of property conducted with the aim of furthering environmental ends. Under such a broad definition, a dizzying variety of acts could qualify as ecotage: popping the tires of SUVs to discourage their use, destroying mining

[5] Note I will often drop the "self- and/or" qualification for aesthetic reasons; whenever I talk of "other-defense," I mean "self- and/or other-defense," unless stated otherwise.

equipment to make future investment in extraction more expensive, and blowing up oil pipelines to discourage further oil-field exploration are all possible examples of ecotage. The class of acts satisfying this definition is so broad for two reasons. First, environmental ends are numerous; second, "property" is a broad term, encompassing anything that is legally owned.

This paper does not focus on what qualifies as an environmental end. "Environmental end" is difficult to define in the abstract, and defending any particular definition would not obviously serve the purposes of this paper. So long as an instance of ecotage is an instance of effective and proportionate other-defense, then this act is *pro tanto* justified; this conclusion holds, I will argue, regardless of what *exactly* the end adopted by the acting agent is.[6] If we did want a more precise definition of "environmental end," however, we would do well to look to the stated aims of those most closely involved in environmentalist practice (i.e., environmental activists). The "environmental ends" of those engaged in environmentalist practice range from the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the promotion and protection biodiversity, to the reduction of plastic waste and promotion of recycling; all these things plausibly qualify as environmental ends, and any abstract definition would have to accommodate and account for this broad diversity of goals. For the purposes of exposition, however, I choose to present my argument in terms of the familiar and obviously environmental goal of reducing CO_2

[6] As will become clear in the course of my argument, an instance of ecotage qualifies as an instance of self- and/or other-defense only if its aim is to *mitigate the harmful effects of an environmental wrong*; although ecotage could, in principle, aim at the promotion of *any* environmental end, *only* those instances that aim to mitigate the harmful effects of an environmental wrong could ever be justified as instances of permissible other-defense (other instances of ecotage may be justified in other ways). As I say, however, this restriction on the kind of environmental end that ecotage can aim for whilst being *pro tanto* justified as other-defense will become clear in the course of argument: for the time being, I need not adopt any particular understanding of "environmental end."

emissions; the reader is free, however, to employ their own understanding of this term as they wish.

Property, as I understand it, is anything that is legally owned. Further, I take it that some piece of property is *destroyed* just when it is rendered incapable of performing its intended function: a destroyed fishing net is one that cannot catch fish; a destroyed oil pipeline is one that cannot pipe oil, etc. I will not delve any deeper into the metaphysics of property destruction here—I hope it is clear enough for the purposes of this paper what the destruction of property consists in.

This, then, is the definition of ecotage that this paper works with: ecotage is the intentional destruction of property conducted with the aim of furthering environmental ends. The following section briefly discusses extant justifications of ecotage, and situates my other-defensive approach with respect to these views, before the following section presents the main argument.

1.2. Extant Justifications of Ecotage

Few philosophers attempt to justify ecotage directly: most attempts at justification begin by justifying the practice of *uncivil disobedience*, before going on to argue that ecotage can, under certain conditions, qualify as permissible uncivil disobedience. Before considering these latter approaches, however, let us consider the direct approaches first.

Lai and Lim (2023) attempt to justify ecotage directly in terms of *fairness*. They argue that ecotage can be *pro tanto* justified insofar as it distributes the costs of environmental action *fairly*: those most responsible for environmental destruction suffer the consequences of environmentalist action by having their property destroyed. Lai and Lim argue further that ecotage may be *better* with respect to fairness than some less targeted forms of *non*-violent action: the harms of non-violent actions, e.g., blocking roadways, are often borne by members of the public who are comparatively *less* responsible for environmental destruction than the appropriate targets of ecotage. Ecotage can be justified insofar as it is fair.

Lai and Lim's analysis is not in competition with the other-defensive justification presented in this paper, however. Indeed, I take it that my other-defensive justification *subsumes* the fairness justification, insofar as the logic of other-defense both gives an account of *whom* it is legitimate to target, and explains why it is fair for them to be targeted. As I will argue later, an agent is a legitimate target of ecotage, and it is fair to target them, just in case they have made themselves *liable* to its harms by culpably and wrongly engaging in environmentally destructive activity. My other-defensive justification also suggests a robust account of the permissible *limits* of ecotage in a way that Lai and Lim fail to do: ecotage is permissible only if its harms are *i)* proportionate to the property owner's wrongful harm, and *ii)* effective at stopping it. Both of these conditions will be explained in detail later: I mention them now only to highlight how the other-defensive justification of ecotage offered in this paper does more, and goes deeper down the chain of normative justification, than Lai and Lim's fairness-based approach.

The second and final direct justification of ecotage is Martin's (1990) early attempt to justify ecotage on utilitarian grounds: if the good resulting from an instance of ecotage outweighs the bad, then it is justified.

Consequentialist reasoning of this sort surely will play *some* role in our moral thinking about ecotage; in §6 I offer some brief thoughts on when such reasoning might be useful. But on its own it seems woefully insufficient to capture the unique and intricate normativity of the matter at hand: at the very least, consequentialist reasoning struggles to accommodate the fairness-based considerations that Lai and Lim (2023) consider, and which my justification of ecotage shows to be important. Consequentialist considerations shall, for the moment, be left hanging in the background.

These, then, are the attempts to justify ecotage directly. Far more work has been done on justifying ecotage as a special kind of uncivil disobedience, however, and it is to these accounts I now turn.

To begin my exposition, I shall first offer a brief account of what uncivil disobedience is and why ecotage qualifies as an example of it. *Civil* disobedience is widely conceived as illegal but non-violent action whose primary purpose is to communicate an injustice to policymakers and the public; perpetrators of civil disobedience accept the legal consequences of their actions as a symbolic acceptance of the general legitimacy of the state (cf. Martin 1990: 296, Rawls 1999: 320, Milligan 2013: 104, Lai 2019: 90,

Scheuerman 2022: 793, Lai and Lim 2023: 2).[7] As we saw earlier, most prominent environmentalist groups are ideologically committed to actions of this kind.[8]

Actions qualify as *uncivil* disobedience, however, if they fail to meet any of the above conditions apart from illegality.[9] By definition, then, ecotage qualifies as *un*civil disobedience because it involves the (violent) destruction of property;[10] instances of ecotage may also be uncivil in other ways, but the fact that ecotage constitutively involves violence against property guarantees it is.

The most prominent kind of justificatory strategy that defenders of uncivil disobedience use in the contemporary literature is to argue that accepted justifications of *civil* disobedience can be expanded to justify *uncivil* disobedience. The justifications of *civil* disobedience proponents of this strategy employ argue that the normative grounds of our political obligation to obey the laws of a reasonably just society *also* can serve as the grounds of a competing moral obligation to *disobey* these laws, in a civil manner, if such disobedience would effectively rectify an injustice that characterizes this otherwise reasonably just society (Delmas 2018 and Lai 2019). To illustrate these views with an example: suppose we have a natural duty to promote justice. In a sufficiently

[7] Some argue violence against property *can* properly be called civil disobedience, if other conditions are met (e.g., if the perpetrators are willing to accept punishment [Moraro 2007], or if the act constitutes an act of political communication [Marcou 2021], or if the act "embodies a commitment to the political" [Adams 2018]. Welchman [2001] argues specifically that ecotage qualifies as civil disobedience according to *some* historical conceptions of civil disobedience.). *Even if* these views are right, however, and civil disobedience can involve violence, I doubt most instances of ecotage would count as civil disobedience on any definition of the term that includes *any* of the criteria I list above, as it surely must to capture *something* of our ordinary use of the term "civil": apart from illegality, most instances of ecotage will fail to meet *all* of these criteria.

[8] For a good list of examples of civil disobedience, see Grebbell (2020).

[9] Delmas (2018: 47) defines uncivil disobedience as "acts [aimed at combatting injustice] that are covert, violent, evasive, or offensive."

[10] Not *all* property destruction is necessarily illegal, of course: I can choose to destroy my phone without breaking any laws. But unless ecotage is carried out by someone against their *own* property, it *will* be illegal.

just society, this duty to promote justice is the ground of our obligation to obey the law.[11] In an *un*just society, or in an otherwise just society that is unjust *in a certain way*,[12] however, this very same duty to promote justice grounds an obligation (or at least a permission)[13] to *break* the law in the pursuit of justice. Whether this lawbreaking ought to be done civilly or uncivilly depends on what will most effectively promote justice given the circumstances. Some proposed justifications of (roughly) this form have been explicitly applied to ecotage (Lai 2019); those that have not could be insofar as ecotage is a kind of uncivil disobedience. If an instance of ecotage would effectively promote environmental justice, then these views would claim that the grounds of our political duty to obey the law can generate a *pro tanto* obligation for us to engage in ecotage.

These strategies are certainly elegant. They purport to give a unified explanation of *both* our duty to obey the law *and* of the permissibility of breaking it, either civilly or uncivilly: the same normative grounds that explain our obligation to obey the law in some circumstances explain the permissibility of our breaking it in others. I do not have space properly to engage with these views here. For my purposes it will suffice to note, however, that justifications of this kind are compatible with the justification in terms of other-defense that I offer in this paper. This is because a particular instance of ecotage may be (fully) justified on *multiple* grounds, in which case its justification will be overdetermined; it may also be the case that a particular instance of ecotage is supported

[11] Cf. Rawls (1999).
[12] Note again proponents of this view accept we can be permitted to act illegally even if the society in which we are permitted to do so is sufficiently just so as to generate a *general* obligation to obey the law (Lai 2019: 110–111). I will not go into the complexities of how these views purport to do this here.
[13] Lai (2019: 90) "avoid[s] taking a stand on whether different forms of disobedience are justified as merely permissible or obligatory"; Delmas (2018) talks primarily in terms of *obligation* rather than permissibility. For the sake of presenting the general philosophical shape of these views, however, I too will not take a stand on the matter here.

by multiple *pro tanto* justifications, the combination of which justify it *overall*.[14] Either way, the truth of the above kind of justification does not in any way preclude the soundness of the distinct kind of justification I offer in this paper.[15]

Another prominent strategy in the literature on uncivil disobedience, and the one I will uniquely apply to ecotage, attempts to employ the logic of defensive harm to justify particular kinds of uncivil disobedience. Pasternak (2019) applies the logic of defensive harm to justify political rioting; Caney (2015) does so to (partially) ground a right to resistance against global injustice.[16] Indeed, justifications of this kind enjoy an illustrious activist pedigree: co-founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, uses the logic of (collective) self-defense to justify the Party's campaigns of uncivil disobedience (Newton 1967).

[14] Certain justifications may also apply to some cases of ecotage better than others. For what it is worth, I think my other-defensive justification does better when applied to the environmental wrongs of private actors and foreign states, and the expanded-duty-to-law views do better in cases of environmental wrongs perpetrated by one's own state. There is much of interest to unpack here, and doing so is beyond the scope of my argument here: I will leave this possibility for further inquiry.

[15] Both Delmas (2018) and Lai (2019) claim we can derive duties to engage in uncivil disobedience from our general *Samaritan* duty to save those in peril when doing so is at little cost to ourselves: uncivil disobedience may be an effective means of rescuing people from the perils of climate breakdown. On its face, the Samaritan justification is similar to my other-defensive justification of ecotage. The crucial difference between these justifications, however, is that to generate reasons of other-defense, the "other" in the situation must be the victim of some wrongful harm; to generate reasons of the Samaritan kind, however, the "other" need only be in *peril*, even if this peril is not wrongfully caused. Other-defensive reasons of the kind I defend operate *exclusively* in conditions of injustice, whereas Samaritan reasons can operate in any context in which there is peril. This difference often may be small in practice, but it is nonetheless important to be aware of in our normative-ethical theorizing. Moreover, my view accounts for the *pro tanto* permissibility of engaging in ecotage as an act of self-defense: the Samaritan view cannot speak to cases of this kind, given that we cannot have *self*-directed Samaritan duties.

[16] For a critique of employing the logic of defensive harm to justify political violence against the *state*, see Flanigan (2021). Note, however, Flanigan's argument is that political violence against the state (e.g., violently resisting arrest) rarely satisfies the *efficacy* and *proportionality* conditions on permissible self-defense; my arguments in §5 show, contra Flanigan, that ecotage *can* satisfy these conditions, and thus be *pro tanto* justified as an act of self- and/or other-defense.

The logic of defensive harm, however, has not yet been applied directly to ecotage.[17] This paper, then, fills this gap by applying the logic of defensive harm to ecotage, and arguing that the following conclusion results:

> *Ecotage as Other-Defense*: Instances of ecotage are *pro tanto* justified insofar as they are instances of effective and proportionate self- and/or other-defense.

The argument I use to get to this conclusion is presented formally in the next section.

2. Ecotage as Other-Defense

The argument I present is as follows:

Ecotage as Other-Defense

P1 Runaway climate change will severely harm many present and future people;

P2 Certain agents (*climate aggressors*) culpably and wrongly engage in activities that contribute enormously to climate change (e.g., oil companies);

Thus

[17] The closest I have found to such an application comes from Daniel Goldhaber, the director of *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, who said in a Guardian newspaper interview "if you see how this is self-defense for these eight characters… that opens up a whole world of questions and possibilities for the future of the climate movement" (Hans 2023).

IC1 Climate aggressors are culpably and wrongly harming many present and future people;

P3 Aggressors make themselves liable to effective and proportionate defensive harm when they culpably and wrongly harm others (victims);

P4 Victims or agents acting on victims' behalf are *pro tanto* permitted to defensively harm aggressors, provided this defensive harm is effective and proportionate;

Thus

IC2 Climate aggressors are liable to defensive harm, and climate victims or agents acting on their behalf are *pro tanto* permitted to (effectively and proportionately) defensively harm them;

Given

P5 Sabotage of a climate aggressor's property (*ecotage*) is a harm that can be both proportionate to and effective at halting or slowing a climate aggressor's climate-change-causing activities;

Then

C Instances of ecotage, insofar as they are instances of effective and proportionate self- and/or other-defense, are *pro tanto* justified.

The next sections (§3–5) elucidate and defend the above argument step-by-step, and aim to show it to be sound.

3. Defending Ecotage as Other-Defense: Climate Aggressors

Premise 1 ("runaway climate change will severely harm many present and future people") is clearly true. If it were not, why bother doing *anything* to mitigate the climate crisis?

Of course, the truth of Premise 1 depends on a satisfactory resolution of the non-identity problem: for this claim to be true, we need some account of harm that explains how future people are harmed by climate change even though they owe their existence to it (Parfit 1984). This is, unsurprisingly, a task I do not undertake in this paper. We might think, for example, a non-comparative account of harm is best suited here, according to which future generations are harmed by climate change insofar as their lives go, in some way, *badly* as a result of it; or a maybe a non-counterfactual but still comparative account of harm might work, according to which future generations are harmed insofar as they are made *worse off* than current generations, or made badly off in comparison to some other morally relevant standard of wellbeing.[18] We might try to claim that we *can* compare wellbeing levels across possible future people when these people share *some* morally relevant identity (e.g., as *the people resulting from my choice*) (Wolf

[18] For more on these options see, e.g., Harman (2004).

2009). Lastly, we could *dissolve* the non-identity problem by claiming it rests on a mistake (Weinberg 2008). The solution (or dissolution) we choose to adopt does not matter for my purposes here, however. All that is important for the purposes of this paper is that, on some plausible understanding of harm, runaway climate change *will* severely harm many present and future people. That it will seems clearly true.

Before proceeding to Premise 2, I should note that I will be grounding my justification of ecotage only on the wrongful harms *to persons* that climate aggressors inflict. This, of course, is an omission undertaken regretfully for the sake of space: many *non-human* beings have been and will be (wrongfully) harmed by climate change, and so the harms they suffer could, in principle, *also* serve to justify ecotage on other-defensive grounds. The complexities of establishing whether this is the case, however, shall be left to another time. For now it will suffice to show that ecotage is *pro tanto* justified on other-(person)-defensive grounds, rather than on other-(creature)-defensive grounds, or even other-(living thing)-defensive grounds.

Premise 2 requires a bit more unpacking. Premise 2 tells us certain agents culpably and wrongly engage in activities that contribute enormously to climate change. Note to start, with *P2*, I have in mind primarily certain *collective* agents, e.g., large oil companies, big logging companies, or industrial farmers, rather than individual agents like you or me. This is not to deny individual agents' responsibility for the harms of climate change. I focus on climate aggressors that are collective agents because at least some of these collective agents contribute *far more* to climate change than any particular individual does: just 100 companies have emitted 71% of all greenhouse gas emissions since 1998 (Griffin 2017: 10). Therefore, if *anything* follows morally from contributing

to climate change, then we will be able to see this most obviously by focusing on these agents, who contribute the most. Whether and to what extent my argument applies to individual agents shall be left up to the reader to decide.

The first thing that needs to be done to justify *P2*, then, is to justify the claim that these climate aggressors (oil companies, meat processing firms, etc.) *are* in fact agents, capable of acting culpably and wrongly at all. In defense of this claim, note first that we *treat* these collective entities as if they are agents, both in law and in conversation, and do not find it odd to do so. We freely say things like "*Shell* did this," "*BP* has been found guilty of that," etc. On some accounts of morally responsible agency, being embedded in actual responsibility-conferring practices in this way is *sufficient* for qualifying as a morally responsible agent (e.g., Strawson 1962).

Even if we do not accept these views, though, our practice here still should be taken as a useful guide to the reality. These collective entities have deliberative and causal capacities that are independent from those of the individuals that partly constitute them: when a board of directors makes a decision, for example, this decision is attributable to *the board*, taken as a unified and emergent whole, rather than to the conjunction of the individuals that comprise it. Even on quite demanding views about the conditions for responsible agency, certain collective entities will qualify as at least minimally responsible agents (Pettit 2007).

Indeed, given the importance of attributing agency to collective entities for our ordinary responsibility practices, we might think that accounting for the agency of certain collective entities—the ones we commonly hold responsible in law and in

conversation—should itself serve as a condition on the plausibility of any account of morally responsible agency. As far as our thinking about the morality of ecotage is concerned, then, we have good reason to take our responsibility practices at face value: when we talk as though these collective entities are *agents*, we make no mistake.

Accepting this, it still needs to be shown that *i)* these agents (climate aggressors) are *culpable* for their climate-change-causing activities; *ii)* these activities are *wrong* and *iii)* these activities contribute *enormously* to climate change.

To justify the claim that they are wrong, I need not assume any particular account of wrongness: instead I argue these activities have a *multitude* of features that, either individually or together, are wrong-making on most plausible accounts of wrongness. These wrong-making features, to be elucidated in a moment, are as follows: climate aggressors have *i) known* for a long time that their activities are both *ii) extremely harmful* and *iii) avoidable*.

Oil companies, for example, have *known* about how their activities contribute to climate change, and about its harmful effects, for many years (Franta 2018). Much of the earliest climate science was funded by large oil companies; upon finding out about the greenhouse effect, well before policy makers and the public, these companies used this information solely to plan for oil exploration deeper into the melting Arctic, and plan for raising the heights of their oil rigs to accommodate sea-level rise (McKibben 2019: chap. 7). Moreover, given the causes and impacts of climate change are now widely known and publicized, it is implausible to suggest that climate aggressors *do not* know

about the deleterious environmental effects of their actions;[19] the climate aggressors we are considering, then, clearly act in full knowledge of the harmful effects of their activities. Surely this is a wrong-making feature if there ever was one.

That the activities of climate aggressors contribute enormously to climate change and thus, by *P1*, are *extremely harmful*, is also clear: as I noted previously, 100 companies have emitted 71% of all greenhouse gas emissions since 1998 (Griffin 2017: 10). We might doubt the veracity of this statistic, and thus the claim that climate aggressors' activities are *extremely* harmful, however, due to a problem of carbon accounting: How can we attribute these emissions to these collective agents, if these collective agents act on behalf of *individuals* who ultimately benefit from these carbon-intensive activities?

There are different ways of carbon accounting; I do not want to get into the details here.[20] One strong reason to attribute emissions to the collective agents we are focusing on, rather than to the downstream individuals who benefit from their activities, however, follows from the fact that their activities have, for a long time, been *avoidable* for these collective agents in a way that their benefits have not been for individual consumers. Oil companies, for example, have been aware that feasible green alternatives to their products exist for some time, and yet actively have stifled their adoption, primarily by lobbying hard against green legislation (Laville 2019, Ambrose 2021). As these collective agents have the economic power to trigger a transition away

[19] Even in the unlikely situation that some climate aggressor does *not* in fact know the harmful effects of their actions, their ignorance plausibly neither makes their actions any less wrong, nor mitigates their responsibility with respect to action's bad effects: this is because their ignorance *itself* is culpable, given robust climate science is so widely and readily available. Climate aggressors may well have a *duty* to know about the harmful effects of their actions; if they fail to fulfil this epistemic duty, then their ignorance fails to extinguish the wrongness of the actions they perform whilst ignorant. Although of theoretical interest, these cases are surely very rare in the contemporary context, and thus of little practical importance; I will thus set them aside.

[20] See, e.g., Afionis (2016).

from carbon-intensive activities, in a way that no individual consumer does, then there is at least one good reason to attribute emissions to *them* rather than to downstream consumers: they acquire the carbon debt willingly by refusing to act on the alternatives.

So: that climate aggressors *know* that their activities are *extremely harmful* and *avoidable* is surely enough to render them wrong on most plausible accounts of wrongness. All that is left to do to show the truth of *P2* is to show that climate aggressors are *culpable* for their wrongful actions.

We have already seen that the climate aggressors under consideration are collective agents. In our ordinary legal and conversational responsibility-conferring practice, an agent is culpable (i.e., blameworthy or praiseworthy) for some action if they perform this action freely and knowingly.[21] Absent any major revision of our ordinary responsibility-conferring practice, then, climate aggressors will be culpable for their actions if they perform them freely and knowingly.

We already have accepted that climate aggressors engage in their (wrongful) climate-change-causing activities knowingly.[22] What remains to be shown, then, is that they do so *freely.* To demonstrate this, we need not delve deep into the nature of free action. It will be sufficient to note that, on the face of it, climate aggressors' actions bear the hallmarks of prototypically free action: their activities are the result of choices they make through some (corporate) decision-making procedure, and nothing or nobody external to them *forces* these agents to make the choices they do. If an *individual* agent

[21] Variations of this common-sense account of culpability is widely found in the literature on moral responsibility: the earliest example I can think of can be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics III.1* (Aristotle trans. Irwin 1999).
[22] Ibid. Fn. 19.

chooses, unforced, through some decision procedure that is attributable to them, to perform some action, then this action is ordinarily seen as free and, in the absence of culpable ignorance, culpable. I see no sufficiently deep disanalogy between individual agents so described and the collective agents under consideration to warrant holding the former culpable for their actions but the latter not. Although the decision-procedures employed by collective agents may differ in certain respects to those of individual agents,[23] the fact that *some* such procedure is employed to reach a decision that is attributable to them and them alone is, I submit, sufficient to accept that actions taken on the basis of that decision are done freely. Climate aggressors, it seems, are culpable for their actions.

Before accepting Premise 2, however, there is one concern that needs to be addressed: we might think climate aggressors' culpability for their wrongful actions is reduced by considerations of situational moral luck. The situational luck argument, as I will call it, goes like this:

P1 You are responsible for your actions only insofar as you are free with respect to those actions.

P2 Certain situations set constraints or limits upon the range of actions that are available to you, thus restricting your freedom with respect to your action in that situation.

[23] Most obviously, collective decision-procedures operate between, rather than within, individual agents.

C Thus, in situations of limited freedom, you are less responsible for the actions you choose to do.

Applying this argument to the case of climate aggressors, we get the idea that climate aggressors act in the context of a complicated economic system that restricts or constrains the set of actions they are free to choose from; as their options are limited by the economic context in which they act, then their culpability with respect to the actions they perform in the face of these options is reduced.

Even granting in theory that culpability *could* be diminished by such considerations, however, this argument demonstrably does not apply to the climate aggressors we are considering. First of all, one's freedom with respect to a choice situation is constrained only if the structure of this situation is *outside of your control*, if this situation is imposed upon you, and not of your own design. While this may be true in the case of *individuals* acting in the context of an economic system given to them, this plausibly *is not* true in the case of the climate aggressors we are considering. The sheer economic *size* of some of these climate aggressors affords them considerable power both to create and to reinforce the economic system that determines the scope of the options available to them. Just think of the vast sums some of these companies spend on lobbying to create economic legislation that rules in their favor (Laville 2019, Ambrose 2021). This power to create and reinforce the economic context in which they act makes these climate aggressors at least partially responsible for the context in which they act; if anything, then, climate aggressors are *doubly* culpable for their actions, given they are both the authors of these actions *and* the authors of the context in which these actions are performed.

Premise 2, then, is true: certain agents (climate aggressors) culpably and wrongly engage in activities that contribute enormously to climate change. Combining this with *Premise 1*, we get the claim (*IC1*) that climate aggressors are culpably and wrongly harming many present and future people; from here on in, let us call anyone who is culpably and wrongly harmed by climate aggressors *climate victims*.

4. Defending Ecotage as Other-Defense: Liability to Defensive Harm

So far, we have accepted climate aggressors culpably and wrongly harm others (*IC1*). From this starting point, the main argument of this paper builds towards the claim (*IC2*) that climate aggressors are liable to defensive harm, and climate victims or agents acting on their behalf are *pro tanto* permitted to effectively and proportionately defensively harm them. The remainder of this section will flesh-out the argument between *IC1* and *IC2*, elucidate its key terms, and ultimately show *IC2* to be sound.

The first step from *IC1* to *IC2* is Premise 3: the generic claim that aggressors make themselves liable to effective and proportionate defensive harm when they culpably and wrongly harm others. By "liable" I mean an aggressor is liable to some defensive harm just in case they would not be *wronged* if someone were to inflict this harm upon them. To illustrate this idea, consider:

> *Bob The Attacker:* You are walking along the street and someone (Bob) jumps out and attacks you. Unless Bob is stopped, he is certain to break your arm. His attack is entirely unjustified, and he is fully culpable with respect to his action. The only

> way for you to neutralize Bob's attack and avoid having your arm broken is to break his little finger; you decide to do so, and in so doing cause him considerable harm, albeit less than he would have caused you.

Our judgement here is that you do not do anything wrong: your breaking Bob's finger is entirely permissible. This is so partly because, by harming Bob in this way, you do not *wrong* him: you do not violate any claim Bob has, in this situation, not to be harmed in this way.[24] In other words, you do not wrong Bob by breaking his finger because he has, through his actions, made himself *liable* to your defensive harm.

All the above is true even though Bob *usually* has some strong claim (perhaps a right) against being harmed; something about Bob's behavior in this case makes him liable to a harm that it would otherwise be wrong to inflict upon him. Philosophers disagree over what exactly this something is. Some think Bob's acting culpably and wrongly itself explains his liability to defensive harm in this situation (Ferzan 2005); others think features of Bob's action other than the fact of its culpable wrongness generate liability.[25] I do not need to adjudicate between these views here. All I need for my argument to go through is that we accept Premise 3: as long as it is true *that* culpability generates liability to defensive harm, it does not matter *why,* normatively speaking, this claim is true. Importantly, no philosopher of self- and other-defense contests the truth of Premise 3: those that normatively explain liability in terms of some fact other than

[24] Note some defensive harms may be permissible even if their infliction wrongs the aggressor; this is a possibility I leave to one side.

[25] Quong (2012: 47) claims that aggressors are liable to defensive harm because they "treat others as if they lack the moral claims necessary to protect them from the harms [they] impose"; McMahan (2005) and McMahan (2009) ground liability in the fact that aggressors are (perhaps non-culpably) morally responsible for the harms they threaten; and Thomson (1991) grounds liability in the aggressor's status as a rights-violating threat. As I will show shortly, all these views accept Premise 3: they disagree only in their explanation of *why* Premise 3 is true.

the culpable wrongness of an aggressor's action are moved to do so only because they believe culpable wrongness is not *necessary* for liability; none of them contest that culpable wrongness is *sufficient* for liability.

In short, accepting Premise 3 is highly intuitive and puts us in good philosophical company. Yet before moving on, more needs to be done to elucidate Premise 3's crucial reference to *proportionality* and *efficacy*: as we shall see, these conditions play an important dual-role in my argument.[26] Let us consider each in turn.

To motivate the proportionality condition, consider again *Bob The Attacker.* If, instead of breaking Bob's finger, the only way to neutralize his attack would have been to *kill* him, then there would have been no way for you permissibly to avoid his attack: to kill Bob to prevent him from injuring your arm would be to wrong Bob or, in other words, to inflict a harm upon him for which he is not liable. Bob's attacking you makes him liable to *some* harm, but not to all harm, and certainly not to a harm as severe as death. This result is plausibly explained by there being a *proportionality* constraint on aggressors' liability to defensive harm: the amount of harm an aggressor makes themself liable to by culpably and wrongly harming some other is in some way proportionate to the magnitude of the aggressor's original wrongful harm.

Precisifying the proportionality condition beyond merely noting its existence is unnecessary for the overall task at hand, but plausibly this condition would hold that the defensive harm to which an aggressor is liable may be *more* severe than the original

[26] To foreshadow: proportionality and efficacy serve both as constraints on the nature of the harm aggressors make themselves liable to, and as conditions on the *pro tanto* permissibility of agents' harmful responses to aggressors.

wrongful harm, but not *too much* more. For example, if the only way you could prevent me from (wrongly) flicking you on the cheek is by killing me, then this harm would be disproportionate, and thus a harm to which I am not liable. But if you could stop me flicking you by flicking me *twice*, or perhaps by flicking me *twice as hard as I was going to flick you*, then maybe this is proportionate. The details, although important, are not important here: all that matters is that there is clearly *some* proportionality constraint on the magnitude of the defensive harm to which aggressors make themselves liable.[27]

Next let us consider the *efficacy* condition. Very often it is assumed that some form of *necessity* condition accompanies the proportionality constraint on liability to defensive harm: namely, aggressors are liable only to defensive harms that are the *least harmful necessary means* for avoiding or neutralizing their original wrongful harm.[28] I think this formulation of the necessity condition is too strong, and that we should go with what I call an *efficacy condition*, for at least two reasons. These reasons reveal themselves by considering the following case:

> *Feathered Foe:* Suppose someone (A) unjustifiably and culpably attacks you, and you could prevent this attack in one of two ways. Option One is to strike A very hard, causing them considerable harm; this course of action is almost certain to succeed, and you know it to be. Option Two is to use the feather in your pocket to tickle A's cheek; given A is very ticklish, this response would neutralize A's attack whilst causing them far less harm.

[27] For more on the proportionality condition see, e.g., Rodin (2011), McMahan (2014), and Flanigan (2021: 6–7).
[28] For more on the necessity condition, see Statman (2008), Lazar (2012), Frowe (2014), and Steinhoff (2019).

Even though Option Two is epistemically far more difficult for you to access (How could you reasonably be expected to know A is ticklish?) and less likely to succeed (What if you tickle the wrong part of A's cheek?), the necessity condition on defensive harm strictly understood commits us to accepting that A is liable *only* to Option Two: only this option is the least harmful necessary means for avoiding *A's* wrongful harm. Choosing to enact Option One would *wrong A* as it would subject them to a harm to which they are not liable, even given the wrongful threat they pose to you.

Clearly, I think, this is wrong. Assuming the proportionality condition holds for both options, A is liable to both courses of action. The necessity condition strictly understood unfairly restricts A's liability: the aggressor cannot expect to be afforded such a stringent protection against harm given that they culpably and wrongly fail to afford their victim any such protection. Such a stringent necessity condition would seem to be an injustice on behalf of the victim.

I submit that A is liable to Option One because, although not *minimally harmful* to A, it is the only option that is both epistemically available to the victim and likely to succeed; these subjective considerations on behalf of the victim should be factored into an aggressor's liability with respect to the available options. The efficacy condition, as I understand it, can accommodate these subjective considerations: although both options are objectively equally effective insofar as they would both in fact result in the neutralization of A's wrongful harm if implemented, Option Two's lower probability of success and epistemic inaccessibility weigh negatively against its comparative harmlessness to make it a less effective option *from the perspective of the victim,* and

thus less effective all things considered. Tempering the strict necessity condition with considerations of epistemic availability and likelihood of success generates the far more plausible efficacy condition.

Fleshing-out the efficacy condition beyond this brief sketch is a far bigger task than this paper can undertake. For now, however, I hope we can accept on the basis of our consideration of *Feathered Foe* that *some* form of efficacy condition of the kind I have sketched is a condition on the kind of harm an aggressor makes themselves liable to: an aggressor is liable to some defensive harm only if this defensive harm is effective, where being effective need not mean minimally harmful for the reasons just discussed. We should, then, accept Premise 3: aggressors make themselves liable to effective and proportionate defensive harm when they culpably and wrongly harm others.

Before moving on to Premise 4, note the efficacy condition is important to the case of ecotage in the following way. It might in fact be *possible* to prevent climate aggressors from doing their wrongful acts through an extended campaign of peaceful protest, non-violent civil disobedience, and gradual policy change. Although this course of action would be minimally harmful to the aggressors, it may have a lower probability of succeeding, and be less epistemically accessible to us, than more direct and harmful action like ecotage: the efficacy condition leaves open the permissibility of the latter option whereas the necessity condition may not. I'll say more about the efficacy of ecotage later on: for now, I ask you only to accept the efficacy condition as a point of abstract normative theory.

We might think an aggressor's liability to some defensive harm entails that their victims are permitted to inflict this defensive harm on them: if Bob is liable to having his finger broken, then necessarily it is permissible for you, as Bob's victim, to inflict this harm upon him. This entailment does not hold, however. Although the aggressor's liability *contributes* to the permissibility of their victims' inflicting an effective and proportionate defensive harm on them,[29] *other* factors may tell against the permissibility of this defensive harm and thus make its infliction overall impermissible. To see this, consider

> *Bob and Bystander:* This case is identical to *Bob The Attacker* in every respect, except for its being the case that breaking Bob's little finger in self-defense would result in enormous harm to some innocent bystander.

The possibility of seriously harming an innocent bystander plausibly makes it impermissible for you to defensively harm Bob in *Bob and Bystander.* This is in spite of the fact that the case is, in every other respect, identical to *Bob the Attacker*: Bob is still liable to having his little finger broken, given this is an effective and proportionate defensive harm, and that this liability still counts in favor of the permissibility of inflicting this harm on him. Yet in *Bob and Bystander* these considerations are outweighed by the possibility of harm to an innocent bystander: the defensive harm to which Bob is liable is no longer permissible.

[29] We might think liability *enables* permissibility rather than *contributes* to it. But this is a minor point of detail: the reader is free to decide which rendering they prefer based on their other normative and meta-normative commitments.

There may be many other kinds of consideration that could tell against the permissibility of an otherwise permissible defensive harm; we need not even begin to consider them here. Instead, we can settle for the claim that an aggressor's liability to some defensive harm entails that their victims are *pro tanto* permitted to inflict this defensive harm on them: an aggressor's liability *contributes* to the permissibility of their victims' defensively harming them, but does not guarantee that this course of action is *overall* permissible, given other considerations may tell against its permissibility. Self-defensive harm, then, is *in at least one way* justified (and therefore permissible) insofar as it is effective, proportionate, and directed towards a liable aggressor. This, I think, should not be a controversial claim.

This claim is not yet Premise 4, however: Premise 4 is the claim that victims *or agents acting on victims' behalf* are *pro tanto* permitted to defensively harm aggressors, provided this defensive harm is effective and proportionate. To accept Premise 4, then, it needs to be shown that an aggressor's liability to defensive harm not only serves as *pro tanto* justification for *victims'* self-defensively harming them, but also as *pro tanto* justification for *agents acting on victims' behalf* to other-defensively harm them.

Note first that *even if* it turns out to be the case that *only* climate victims are *pro tanto* permitted to (self-)defensively harm climate aggressors, this still would be a major practical result: there are many climate victims around the world to whom this *pro tanto* permission would apply.

Yet we need not settle for just this self-defensive conclusion. I see no good reason why an aggressor's being liable to defensive harm would in one way justify *self*-defensive

harm, but *in no way* justify *other*-defensive harm. To be sure, there may well be *additional* normative constraints on the permissibility of other-defense that do not apply to self-defense: in cases of other-defense, for example, the victim may have to consent to (or at least not refuse) another's acting so as to save them from harm (Parry 2017).[30] These additional constraints *may* make the conditions on permissible other-defense more demanding than those for self-defense, for example; they *may* make other-defense required in situations where self-defense is merely permissible (Fabre 2007). Yet it would be absurd to maintain that these additional constraints, whatever they are, *extinguish* the *pro tanto* permissibility of other-defense that follows from an aggressor's liability to defensive harm. If an aggressor's liability to defensive harm is permissibility-making *at all*, then plausibly it is so for *any* agent able to inflict that defensive harm, be they a victim or a third-party.

Premise 4, then, holds: victims or agents acting on victims' behalf are *pro tanto* permitted to defensively harm aggressors, provided this defensive harm is effective and proportionate. Applying the generic Premises 3 and 4 to the particular case of climate aggressors and climate victims, we get *IC2*: climate aggressors are liable to defensive harm, and climate victims or agents acting on their behalf are *pro tanto* permitted to effectively and proportionately defensively harm them.

5. Defending Ecotage as Other-Defense: Ecotage as Defensive Harm

[30] For more on the morally relevant distinctions (or lack thereof [Thomson 1991: 306–308]) between self- and other-defense, see Fabre (2007).

The remainder of the argument proceeds somewhat more quickly. *Premise 5* claims that sabotage of a climate aggressor's property (*ecotage*) is a harm that can be both proportionate to and effective at halting or slowing a climate aggressor's climate-change-causing activities. This claim assumes that destroying an agent's property is a form of harm; when performed for environmental purposes, this harm is *ecotage.* This, to me, seems like the right way to think about what property destruction is: it is, at the very least, in keeping with the way we use ordinary moral language. Ecotage, insofar as it involves the destruction of property, then, is a form of harm.

The crux of Premise 5, then, is the claim that ecotage can be both *i)* proportionate to an aggressor's wrongful harms, and *ii)* effective at halting or slowing these harms. That it can be proportionate is surely beyond doubt. The harms of climate change are *incredibly* severe; although the harms of ecotage may be far from trivial, they surely *can* be less severe than the ecological harms brought by the very worst climate aggressors; as such, they can be proportional. What is the blowing up of a pipeline when the wellbeing of countless future generations is at stake?

The efficacy of ecotage is more controversial. *Whether* ecotage is, in general, an effective way of halting or slowing a climate aggressor's climate-change-causing activities is an empirical question whose answer would require diving into political science, history, and economics. I cannot do justice to this question here.[31] Having said this, however, there are least two robust mechanisms through which ecotage can, *in theory* at least, halt or slow an aggressor's climate-change-causing activities; making

[31] For a detailed and emphatically affirmative answer to this question, see Malm (2021).

note of these two mechanisms should give us sufficient reason to believe ecotage *can be* effective, and thus to justify our acceptance of Premise 5.

First, there are ecotage's *direct* effects. If the property destroyed by an act of ecotage is itself involved in an environmentally destructive activity, then destroying this property directly halts this activity and prevents the harm it brings. Ecotage can, in theory, be an effective means of preventing wrongful environmental harm in virtue of these direct effects.

Second, there are ecotage's *indirect* effects on the climate aggressor. Ecotage creates an investment risk that makes it costly for polluters to engage in further polluting activities; knowing their polluting infrastructure is threatened by the prospect of (*pro tanto* permissible) destruction, climate aggressors may be less likely to invest in such infrastructure in the future. This, in turn, will reduce climate aggressors' harmful activities, thus preventing future wrongful harms. Ende Gelände, a German environmental activist group, sums up this indirect mechanism in their slogan "we are the investment risk."[32]

On the basis of these considerations, we have good reason to believe Premise 5 holds true in theory: ecotage is a harm that *can be* both proportionate to and effective at halting or slowing a climate aggressor's climate-change-causing activities.

[32] Ende Gelände (2021). See also C. M. (1990) for an early statement of this logic.

The conclusion, then, follows from *IC2* and *P5* taken together: instances of ecotage, insofar as they are instances of effective and proportionate other-defense, are *pro tanto* justified.

This is the main aim of the paper complete: I have shown that intentionally destroying property with the aim of furthering environmental ends can be, in one important way, justified. To finish, I will briefly consider when such acts may be *overall* justified.

6. Ecotage: *Overall* Justified?

Although ecotage may be *pro tanto* justified in the way I have described, there are likely to be very many other factors that are relevant to its *overall* justification, and thus to its permissibility, in particular cases. Although I cannot hope to consider all these factors in the abstract, I suggest that, at the very least, the following considerations reasonably *could* be thought to count against ecotage in at least some circumstances.

The first objection to ecotage is that it is *risky*. Blowing up a pipeline, for example, may, if not done carefully, severely harm innocent bystanders.[33] Even though these effects may be merely foreseen and not intended (cf. Milligan 2013: 115), we might think ecotage's posing a risk of harm to persons could tip the scales against its permissibility in certain cases.

[33] Or bystanders who, even if not completely innocent, may not be liable to the degree of harm caused to them.

This may well be the case. Whether it is will depend both on our general normative attitude towards risk, and also on the expected (moral) value of the particular instance of ecotage under consideration. The former is a general point of normative theory I will not explore here; the latter is something that only can be considered on a case-by-case basis. But I see no *a priori* reason why, through careful planning and risk-mitigation—by picking remote targets, or warning those who could be in the area about a possible action, for example—instances of ecotage cannot be made *permissibly* risky. In certain circumstances it may turn out that ecotage can be risky without being impermissibly reckless (cf. Milligan 2013: 113).

Next, we might think ecotage could *backfire*. Inflicting harm on powerful economic agents in defense of climate victims may make citizens and governments view the demands of the climate movement in an unfavorable light; the demands of the climate movement as a whole may be tarnished by association with uncivil disobedience. This, in turn, may stifle governments' willingness to adopt environmentally beneficial policies, and ultimately may do more harm than good.[34]

Although this is again a difficult empirical question that cannot be answered in full here, I think careful consideration of recent activist history gives us reason to doubt this backfire effect.[35] It has been argued that many of the major social changes of the last century (first wave feminism, the anti-apartheid struggle, the civil rights movement) relied upon violent direct action, or at least its credible threat, to support the aims of the non-violent protest movements that existed alongside them (Malm 2021). It was

[34] For more on backfire, and empirical evidence in its favor, see, e.g., Stephan and Chenoweth (2008). For critique, see Delmas (2018: 58–59).
[35] For empirical evidence *against* the backfire effect, see Haines (1984).

because of carefully directed violence towards property, or at least its credible threat, that these changes happened when they did. This is not least in part because direct action can push the voting population and policymakers *towards* the demands of non-violent protest movement which, in contrast to the radical groups advocating and engaging in direct action, are framed as more moderate. Ecotage, as other forms of sabotage have in the past, *may* in fact have the beneficial consequence of bolstering the non-violent protest movements that share similar goals.

Lastly, we might worry that ecotage, if it comes to be widely performed, may have damaging secondary economic effects that fall disproportionately on the worst-off. If blowing up a pipeline causes oil prices to rise, then the worst-off groups globally will be made worse off than they already are. These costs to innocent bystanders may well tell strongly against ecotage's overall permissibility.

In response to this worry, I will say only two things. First: can the perpetrator of ecotage really be held responsible for *all* these secondary economic effects, given how many casual factors intervene between an instance of ecotage and its consequences? This might seem to be a case of resultant moral luck, where the policy decisions of governments in response to ecotage and the economic forces governing our particular economic system intervene in the ontological space between an act of ecotage, for which the acting agent is responsible, and its effects, for which the agent may not be responsible.

Second, even if we are not convinced by this responsibility argument, we might be convinced by the more naively consequentialist approach: perhaps a temporary harm

to presently existing people can be outweighed by a far greater benefit to countless generations of future people.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that instances of ecotage are *pro tanto* permitted insofar as they are instances of effective and proportionate other-defense. Although I briefly discussed some other considerations that may be relevant to the *overall* justification of ecotage in particular cases, it should be clear that far more needs to be done to arrive at a complete theory of the ethics of ecotage; I hope this paper has shown such a theory ought to be found.

In closing, I would like to make a brief note about this paper's framing of ecotage and the climate crisis in terms of aggressors, victims, defense, and attack. Thinking in combative terms about the climate crisis is a powerful and under-utilized tool in analytic environmental philosophy. Climate change is not just an accidental process with respect to which we are all innocent passengers: it is a problem that is in large part engineered wrongfully by those who profit from the harms it brings. Perhaps by seeing the crisis in these terms—as a struggle between perpetrators and victims—we can more clearly come to see the morality of the situation at hand: namely, that certain actions, which may be impermissible in a context of justice, become permissible, and maybe even required, in the unjust world in which we live.

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