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Carbon Offsets and Concerns about Shifting Harms: A Reply to Mintz-Woo

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I am indebted to Kian Mintz-Woo for his careful and substantive engagement with my paper (Mintz-Woo 2024; Elson 2024a; both in this issue). It is a special pleasure to be (gently) criticised by those whose work we admire, and he makes several excellent points. Nevertheless, he has not convinced me, and in this short response, I will focus on three main strands of our disagreement: the importance of factual claims about offsets and additionality, the role of justice and in particular of not emitting as a default baseline for action, and the philosophical importance of individual versus collective moral issues in the face of the climate disaster.

I. THE FACTUAL

Are offsets a scam, or perhaps simply less effective than (honestly) advertised at producing additional emissions reductions? Mintz-Woo (310n1) is right that I assume for the purposes of my paper that offsets 'work', at least much of the time.

I should have been clearer about that assumption, but it is something I engage with a little later in my paper, when I argue that, as individuals, we can deal only in the *expected* emissions increases and decreases our activities cause. If many offsets do not offer genuine additional emissions reductions, is the situation disastrous? Only if the whole industry is so riddled with false promises that it makes reducing our net expected emissions through offset purchases impossible, or nearly so. And even in that case, I think the counterfactual question—

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supposing it were possible to reduce our emissions through offsets, what would be the moral status of doing so?—would still be an important one.

It might be true that offsets are a scam; I hope not. But I am mostly interested in the conditional question just posed, though hopefully not quite so counterfactually. Like many others, when teaching issues of morality's demandingness, I have found that students are often far more comfortable engaging with quasi-factual objections. Did you not know that charities are all corrupt and inefficient, and some form of population control is the only answer to global poverty? Of course I think the answer to both of those is *No (with some complications)*, but my interest is in the conditional moral-philosophical question: *if* this charity and that carbon offset provider are both effective and honest organisations, then does morality demand that I give them some money, and let me off the hook if I give them enough?

Sticking with the factual briefly: Mintz-Woo appeals to modern supply chains, as I did, but draws the opposite moral. He claims that though consumption reductions might not reduce emissions immediately, "the demand signal can propagate much more rapidly than one might expect" (315). I grant this, but our disagreement is about the response to such a signal. That response will not always be reduced emissions. When we are talking about large and efficient(ish!) organisations such as airlines—which are in the business of selling us carbon-intensive goods—perhaps when demand weakens, they will not hesitate to shut down routes and emissions. (I have recently experienced this with post-Brexit, post-pandemic reductions in the frequency of Eurostar trains.) But we should not underestimate the non-market incentives to maintain emissions, such as national security and political motivations to keep the Port Talbot steelworks open and to build airports in the hope that planes will come.

Another way to respond to market signals is to *strengthen* demand through sales or advertising or pressuring governments to reduce taxes. My claim was that, as individual consumers, we do not and cannot know the actual consequences of our actions, so we must hold on to only very thin claims about expected consequences: if nobody flew there would be far less carbon emitted, so it is reasonable to infer that skipping a flight normally causes an expected reduction in emissions. This reasoning is of course defeasible in many cases.

Another factual point is about timescales. One factual claim I considered is that, whereas consumption emissions happen now, offsets typically take much longer. But I think an appeal to expectations can help here too. If we (tendentiously) assume that offsets work, then we must compare a very small likelihood of a large emissions saving now—through a cancelled flight—with a much higher likelihood of a small saving over a longer period, such as through a tree being planted. Assessing the net expected emissions impact and timeline over some suitably long horizon (such as a century) is not easy. Thus I am reluctant to accept the 'different times' ground for calling offsets unjust, though I respect its potential power.

II. DOING NOTHING

Mintz-Woo is also sceptical about my denial that "refraining and not emitting is a privileged baseline" (312). He is right to raise an eyebrow: my denial of this claim is indeed counterintuitive, and it is at the heart of my argument.

We must distinguish between a baseline *level* of net emissions (which, assuming that they are not a scam, offsets can help us reach) and a baseline *distribution* of emissions (which offsets cannot return us to, leading to the problem of injustice and shifting harms). I contend that there is *no* morally-privileged baseline distribution of carbon emissions. All that matters is how *much* we emit, how much net that is, along with any distributive facts about the expected harms of our actions.

It would be best to settle this without appeal to particular moral theories, and Mintz-Woo does indeed argue that there is a good 'commonsense' reason to pick 'stay-home' as a privileged baseline over fly-and-offset, even if the *net* emissions are the same for both (312). (The final option, recall, is fly-and-cocktail.)

The commonsense argument involves an analogy. He asks us to consider buying a lottery ticket which has an expected benefit 'roughly equal' to leaving the money in the bank (312). Rightly, he claims that in such a case it would be 'very weird' to deny that keeping the money is some kind of default. But am I not making a parallel weird claim—that doing nothing is not somehow privileged compared to reaching the same expected benefit via a more circuitous route—about flying and offsetting?

In a sense, clearly yes. But slow down. In the lottery case, imagine that I have been buying a ticket every week for years, and perhaps even that I have got an automatic purchase running. If I do nothing, then the ticket will be bought. In that case it is much less clear to me that *not* buying is the default. Intuitively, I think that 'doing nothing' is a common contextual default for action, as I have discussed in Elson (2019), for example, and that does not always amount to not emitting, or not buying a lottery ticket. Going flight- or car-free takes effort.

But I also question the pertinence of the example. The natural assumption is that if I do not buy a lottery ticket, then my £2 sits at home, lonesome and causally inert. But as I argue in my paper, emissions are not like that. To strain the lottery example by making it closer to the carbon case, imagine that we live in a cashless society and that our money must be left in an investment account. Each account has a level of risk and expected return associated with it, with 'cash' perhaps available as an option with minimal risk and returns. If you have had to pick investments in a defined-contribution pension scheme, you can probably remember what the webpage looked like.

If my money must go in account A or account B, with different investments but a similar expected-return profile, and the different investments will impact different people in different ways, then I do not think there is a privileged baseline. We must impact someone, in unpredictable ways. And when it comes to the *distribution* of climate harms, our situation is more like that: whatever we do, even down to lying in bed or dying, leads to a certain distribution of harms. There is no plausibly privileged option, and 'doing nothing' inherits all the problems of that baseline in the promotion debate.

So, *pace* Mintz-Woo, I do not think in this case it is a poor defence "that you do not know who will be harmed" (312), because that is true whatever you do or do not do. You can control the expected *amount* of harm you inflict, but little more than that. Climate change is particularly difficult in this way, because the opacity runs so deep.

Bernard Williams famously criticised utilitarianism for its doctrine of negative responsibility, for how it (supposedly) makes us mere parts in a causal system, obliterating the difference between those things we cause directly and those we cause indirectly through the responses of other agents. It makes Jim responsible for the extra deaths of the Indians, for

example, because Jim, like all of us, is 'just a locus of causal intervention in the world'.[1]

Whether or not Williams was right that this is utilitarianism's picture and that the picture is incorrect in general, I think the picture is substantially correct when it comes to climate change. With rare exceptions, the causal path from my actions to some climate harm is not only opaque and chaotic, but also runs through the actions of many others in response to those actions, via the mechanisms discussed above under the heading of 'market signals'. All we can do is assess whether we have—in expectation—left things better than we found them, or at least not excessively worse. And that means focusing on our net carbon emissions, or so I have argued.

III. IT IS MY FAULT

Mintz-Woo's final criticism is one of framing and focus: that like many other moral philosophers, I am spending time and ink on questions about "what duties individuals have or what ought an individual do" (316).

He is right that this is my focus, but I think there is room for discussion both of individual duties and of collective responses. Some issues in climate change do seem to draw excessive attention, perhaps: as soon as anyone mentions the non-identity problem in a seminar, there is a good chance that will consume the discussion. But the non-identity problem is interesting, and issues such as individual duties and the inefficacy problem are where climate change touches core questions in traditional moral theory. So I think it is natural that they draw attention, and that many who focus on such issues would *not* otherwise focus on collective climate change issues, but on other issues in core normative ethics (hello again, integrity objection!).

I agree with Mintz-Woo about the importance of groups and policies in response to climate change. The problem was caused by us acting together, after all, and so must be a solution. But I am independently sceptical about the efficacy of *relying* on collective responses. Policies must be sanctioned or at least tolerated by populations, if not imposed on them, and this involves many individual acts—from voting for green parties to populist resistance against green taxes—and I argue (in Elson

[1] Smart and Williams (1973, 96ff). The exact interpretation of Williams on utilitarianism is always controversial.

2024b) that policies do not escape the inefficacy problem. As for the inefficacy of reducing my consumption, so for the inefficacy of voting for particular consumption reductions.

Moreover, group action is not something we as individuals can directly control. Philosophers cannot realistically control whether the UK population as a whole votes for green levies on flights—we simply do not have that much influence. (Which is not to say we should not try.) But if we can increase individual compliance (whether through reduced flying or through offsets) that is at least doing some good. I share Mintz-Woo's scepticism about moral motivation in a climate context, but when he claims that "it's very difficult for [the population] to understand what would actually be effective for them to do" (316), my retort would be that we need more work on which individual actions are effective and permissible. And that of course includes work on carbon offsets.

More broadly, in an argument I hope to develop elsewhere, except for the truly heroic, individuals will *not* stop flying (Elson 2024c). The upshot of thinking carbon offsets a scam or unjust is not staying home, but flying without offsetting. There is always a reason why *my* flight is an exception, and why I am not like those people who are the real villains (they fly business class, or just for the weekend, or…). These reasons are not always bad, but at least if offsets are not a scam, then the world would be a little better if we reached for the offsets rather than the excuse.

Finally, even if climate change is an important group problem, it is also important individual moral problem. It is been objected that my focus on tornadoes as an example underplays the severity and scale of climate change, which involves the destruction of entire ecosystems.[2] But tornadoes kill people! As individuals, when we emit, we both contribute to the larger problem and (on the chaotic model of the atmosphere) have some expectation of killing or maiming others. This presents an important moral question for us as individuals: how much such risk is it permissible to impose, and under what circumstances?

IV. CONCLUSION

Mintz-Woo has raised many pertinent points, some of which reflect underlying differences of approach. But along what I think are the three

[2] By Katherine Meehan, in conversation.

most important dimensions, I have tried to defend my defence of carbon offsets.

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