

## Sit-ins, Blockades, and Lock-ons: Do Protesters Commit Moral Blackmail?

### Abstract

Sit-ins, blockades, and lock-ons are common protest tactics. They work partly because continuing the operation or attempting quickly to remove activists risks injuring or killing them. Injuring or killing the activists is morally wrong, so the targets of the protest must (temporarily) yield to the activists. This appears to be a case of moral blackmail: The blackmailer makes it so that the blackmailed must either do what the blackmailer wants or do something morally wrong. Here, protestors appear to exploit the targets' tendency to be moral. Can such tactics be justified? I contend that they can insofar as such activists merely add further reason to what their targets already have decisive reason to do. The problem of moral blackmail, however, complicates the morality of primarily communicative civil disobedience.

*Keywords: protests, activism, civil disobedience, moral blackmail, direct action*

Consider a common tactic used in protests that fall under the category of direct action. Protestors use their own bodies to obstruct an operation, so that should the operation continue, the protestors would be injured. This often happens in sit-ins or blockades, where activists position themselves in strategic locations. Activists may also employ lock-on equipment to chain themselves to machinery or entrances and exits. The obstruction, and often the unwillingness to injure the protestors (and, of course, the PR crisis and the legal consequences that may follow if casualties occur,) create a (temporary) halt of the operation. Taking into consideration the fact that real-world events are rarely as clean as thought experiments, here are two cases that roughly fit such a description:

*Stop Adani:* In Queensland, Australia, members of Stop Adani locked themselves to train tracks, so that if the trains kept shipping coal for export, the activists would be run over and most likely severely injured or killed.

*Abortion Clinic Blockade:* Anti-abortion activists in Washington DC, US, blocked people from entering the waiting room while chaining themselves together inside the abortion clinic, so that if they were to be forcefully removed, the activists may be injured.

I wish to focus specifically on the phenomenon of protesters putting themselves in harm's way to directly interfere with the operation they are protesting against.

At first glance, we may want to admire the conviction of the activists – they are willing to risk injury or even death for what they believe in. Their sincerity and seriousness apparently deserve our respect (Brownlee 2012; Lim 2021). However, there's also a general worry. Protesters appear to take advantage of a particular vulnerability of their targets, particularly, their targets' unwillingness to violate certain moral duties, typically a duty against harming others, such that their targets must act in a way that they want or risk doing something morally wrong. Simon Keller labels this type of action *moral blackmail* (Keller 2016, 2018), something I will explain further in detail. Moral blackmail is manipulative. Moreover, it is particularly distasteful, as its effectiveness is conditioned on the victim's willingness to abide by the demands of morality. It is also extremely troublesome, as morality appears to "reward" blackmailers by pressuring the blackmailed to do what the blackmailer wants. Given such features, I take it that moral blackmail is deeply morally objectionable. So, can protests that involve sit-ins, blockades, or lock-ons ever be justifiable?

The primary aim of this paper is to distinguish cases of protest that are genuinely morally problematic because they involve moral blackmail from cases that permissibly rearrange moral circumstances (that

is, the arrangement of permissibilities, prohibitions, and other moral statuses,) and thus don't involve moral blackmail. I contend that, other things being equal, protest that rearrange moral circumstances can be justified insofar as they merely add to the duties the targets of protest already have, in ways that are otherwise morally permissible. (To foreshadow, the otherwise permissible cases, I shall argue, typically involve protesters putting themselves, instead of innocent third parties, in harm's way for the sake of worthy goals.) My distinction, I contend, will first and foremost, provide a potential justification for this tactic when it is employed for a just cause; it will, on the other hand, help us further explain the wrong of protesting for unjust ends. Moreover, I will spell out how my analysis has problematic implications for activism that doesn't fall under the category of direct action, in particular, communicative civil disobedience that is primarily done for the sake of raising awareness and making demands.

Two notes before proceeding. First, to focus on the particular undertheorised issue at hand, and given the vast existing literature, I shall sidestep several issues such as whether protests violate the duty to obey the law (Delmas 2018; Delmas & Brownlee 2021) and whether direct action can be justified (Vanderheiden 2005; Weltman 2021). Second, for illustrative purposes, I will proceed as if it is settled that providing and receiving abortion are morally permissible (Crummett 2023), and that exporting coal is impermissible (Green & Denniss 2018). I cannot do either issue full justice. I also acknowledge the morality of the *Stop Adani* case is complicated, and many may disagree with what I take for granted. Here, I merely use the former as an example of a protest that has an unjust cause, and the latter as a protest that has a just cause. Those who disagree with the particular moral evaluations I take for granted here are free to fill in their (least) favourite cases of protests.

So here's the plan. Section 1 introduces the concept of moral blackmail. Section 2 distinguishes direct actions that are innocuous from those that involve moral blackmail. Section 3 extends the discussion to communicative civil disobedience. The conclusion spells out the implications of my analysis.

## 1. Moral circumstance rearrangement and moral blackmail

Keller provides several cases of moral blackmail. Here I adapt two (2018: 482, 493):

*Dog.* I want to go on a vacation without my dog. You refuse to take care of it. I drop my dog at your doorstep, knowing that you believe that letting a dog die is impermissible. You now have to do the right thing, take care of the dog for me. Everything transpires according to my design.

*Teachers.* I am an official who is altering the deal with teachers so to decrease their pay. The best way to prevent me from succeeding is to go on strike. I deliberately announce the decision just before exam periods, because I know that teachers know that that's when students most need their teachers. Everything transpires according to my design.

The basic idea of moral blackmail is that there are “moral circumstances” – the arrangement of duties, permissibilities, and rights, so on and so forth, and they can be rearranged when we do things. One type of rearrangement is particularly troublesome: When someone, the blackmailer, does things such that someone else, the blackmailed, must either do what the blackmailer wants or do something impermissible (Keller 2016, 2018). In the case of *Dog*, the blackmailed must take care of my dog; in *Teachers*, teachers must refrain from going on strike and suffer the fact that I have altered the deal, and should better pray that I don't alter it any further.

Moral blackmail is troublesome for many reasons. First, it seems to create an unfair arrangement of moral circumstances. Yet, unfair as it is, those subject to the demands of morality must still abide by the demands of morality. Second, it works *because* the blackmailed party cares about what morality

demands, suggesting that being moral makes one vulnerable to exploitation. Third, the immoral party is *rewarded* by morality, creating a perverse incentive.

Moral blackmail also has other distasteful features. For example, those with caring duties seem to be particularly vulnerable to it, and when combined with gender norms and expectations, women often bear the brunt (Keller 2016: 717). Here, however, I will not go into further details. All I need here is that it appears to be highly morally problematic when one forces others to choose between yielding and doing something immoral.

So back to the motivating examples of the paper. Is moral blackmail involved?

## 2. Protests that rearrange moral circumstances

*Abortion Clinic Blockade*, or a slightly idealised version of it, conforms to the structure of a standard case of moral blackmail. The moral circumstances were originally such that it was permissible to provide and receive abortion. (For those who disagree, replace this with a protest that aims at a clearly unjust cause.) The anti-abortion activists chained themselves to the entrance, so that if the healthcare workers or patients forced their entry to the clinic, the activists would most likely suffer injury. It may be morally impermissible to injure the activists, perhaps because this case doesn't obviously give rise to justified defensive actions (it may or may not, but a separate argument is required); or perhaps the moral thing to do is wait for the police. Regardless, because of the moral prohibition, healthcare workers and patients are unable to enter and thus unable to perform or receive the treatment. Due to the actions of the activists, an otherwise morally permissible action becomes impermissible, because the activists – now we see they are the blackmailers – rearranged the moral circumstances of this case, and made it such that the blackmailed have to choose between yielding (not providing or receiving abortion), or do something wrong (injuring the activists).

My analysis of the above case helps us see why the blockade tactics can be distasteful. They involve unfairly rearranging moral circumstances: An unwarranted imposition of moral prohibitions. Victims of moral blackmail suffer from a particular injury: A sense of betrayal. Metaphorically speaking, if morality is anthropomorphised, it should be an agent that protects the weak and vulnerable. But no, morality puts pressure on the victim, forcing them to conform to the will of the blackmailer. The blackmailer is thus rewarded by morality, by being immoral.

What about *Stop Adani*? I assume that these environmental activists aimed at a just end, namely, stopping coal. Yet, the ends don't always justify the means. It is, therefore, crucial here to scrutinise the particularities of the case. I believe the strategy of the activists in *Stop Adani* is justified. But where lies the morally relevant difference?

Here's a first go. *Stop Adani* aims at a just cause, namely, stopping the exportation of coal. Again, I take it for granted that Adani should stop transporting coal immediately. Given such a duty, activists, in locking themselves on train tracks built for the sole purpose of shipping coal, did not rearrange moral circumstances so that an otherwise permissible action becomes impermissible; they merely added further reason to solidify a duty Adani, the mining company, already has. Activists did not restrict the range of morally permissible actions the "victim" has, and their actions, therefore, did not involve moral blackmail.

Merely not altering the range of morally permissible actions by itself, however, doesn't directly make a protest that involves moral circumstance rearrangement permissible. Consider an imaginary scenario where activists randomly kidnap innocent people and tie them to the train tracks. This would also give mining companies further reasons to stop shipping coal, and also doesn't make the otherwise permissible act of shipping coal impermissible (as such acts were impermissible in the first place).

However, such acts are obviously impermissible even if the exact reason may be up for debate. (It may involve, for example, putting innocent people in harm's way; disrespecting the autonomy of the kidnapped; or not maximising utility.) Contrasting this to the original *Stop Adani* case, there appears to be a first-person prerogative to risk harm to oneself. Thus, we may add this to the original proposal. In addition to not making an otherwise permissible action impermissible, protests that rearrange moral circumstances should not be morally impermissible for other reasons. In cases of putting someone in harm's way, protestors should only put themselves in harm's way.

Relatedly, the goals that activists aim for must be sufficiently worthy. For example, if a colleague sent me a curt email, they should apologise. However, if I were to use a lock-on device to chain myself to their door and form a blockade, refusing to leave until they apologised, this would clearly be an overreaction, to say the least. In line with the wide contemporary literature on civil disobedience (roughly starting from Rawls 1999), the means must be proportionate to the worthiness of the goals.

But there is a further worry that such protests can be wrong for independent reasons. It may be that such protests disrespect their targets. In a very broad sense, protestors force mining companies to at least temporarily pause mining operations, but not by rationally persuading the companies' leadership that their action is wrong. Protesters make it such that their targets conform to the protesters' will for reasons their targets don't accept, and this is disrespectful.

Even if disrespect is involved, however, such protests may nevertheless be permissible. Here's why. At least when it comes to the coal industry, coercion may be justified, either because coercing the closure of coal mines can be justified as a defensive action (Arridge 2023) or because it is fair for mining companies to bear costs that are instrumental to the closure of environmentally hazardous industries (Lai & Lim 2023). Protests that "get things done" through coercion, however, make their targets do

things for reasons their targets don't accept in ways more forceful than our protestors. Thus, if coercion is disrespectful but permissible, so is moral circumstances rearrangement.

I wish to further emphasise that *Stop Adani* and similar protests actually do engage with the moral faculty of their targets. In contrast to coercion, protestors who put themselves at risk don't merely engage with the cost-benefit analysis capacity of their targets. Instead, they present them with a case that requires moral reasoning: Is it *morally* permissible to continue the operation when others will be harmed in the process? This engagement with the moral faculty of their targets can be interpreted as being done with the hope that their targets will also consider whether the demands are morally significant: Continuing the coal industry puts people in harm's way. The cueing of the moral faculty may, of course, be ineffective; fossil fuel companies are not best known for their strict adherence to moral principles. But effectiveness isn't the point here. It's about respect conveyed through hoping that their targets can think morally and be rationally persuaded.

In sum, we now have an important distinction. While certain instances of direct action involve moral blackmail, others don't. The crucial factor is whether the rearrangement of moral circumstances involves altering what the target has all-things-considered reasons to do. Supplementary factors include whether protestors only place themselves in harm's way and whether the disruptive means are proportionate to the worthiness of the goals. And when protestors appeal to the moral capacity of their targets, no disrespect is conveyed.

### 3. What about primarily communicative civil disobedience?

So far, I have focused on structurally "cleaner" examples. Both *Stop Adani* and *Abortion Clinic Blockade* are cases of direct action: Protestors directly obstruct operations they deem unacceptable (Smith



2018). But many protests are *primarily communicative*. Consider another case of environmental activism.

*XR*. Members of the Extinction Rebellion occupy the highway or streets or trains such that traffic is halted, and road users or travellers have to choose between sitting through the protests and risking running protesters over. Running protesters over is morally prohibited.

Note that here protesters appear to have engaged in a paradigmatically justifiable case of *communicative* civil disobedience, “a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government” (Rawls 1999: 320). In this instance, protesters aim to coerce the audience into listening in order to communicate, so as to bring important but marginalised issues back to the political agenda (Markovits 2005; Smith 2011). The audience is left to come to their own conclusions about important political issues in light of the information brought forth by the protestors (Moraro 2014). (Civil disobedience is an “essentially contested concept” (Scheuerman 2020), and depending on which theory one accepts – something this paper doesn’t purport to decide upon – the cases of direct action are either *primarily coercive* civil disobedience (see, for example, Welchman (2001)) or uncivil disobedience (see, for example, Lai & Lim 2023).) While there seem to be some huge advantages in protestors being civil when they attempt to communicate with their audiences (Coyne 2024), considering the risk of moral blackmail, how do cases of *communicative* civil disobedience fare?

Here, we need to disentangle different aspects of the protest, particularly identifying who the targets are and determining what duties, if any, those targets already have. I wish to start with the government and then move onto the individuals stuck in traffic.

Against the government, the protest forced the government to choose between dispersing the protest (most likely by morally contentious means) or giving in to the demands so that the protestors would disperse willingly. Insofar as the government already had a duty to take urgent climate action, protestors merely added further reasons to the government's existing duty. Thus, no moral blackmail was involved. (I sidestep the issue of whether the state should punish (justified) civil disobedience, but see Moraro (2019) and Lai (2021).)

Regarding individuals, however, things are more complicated. Unlike direct action against perpetrators of injustice, *XR* and similar instances of communicative civil disobedience fare poorly in this respect: They blocked traffic, and forced road users to choose between sitting through the protest and doing something morally wrong. This appears to be a standard case of moral blackmail. Even if their demands are just, so that we indeed should take immediate action against the climate crisis, such actions are not within the power of the average road user. It may be that such protests can be justified in other ways, for example, by insisting that the interest in convenient travel is overridden by the urgency and significance of the goal of mitigating the climate crisis. Despite possibly being justified overall, it may be that committing moral blackmail nevertheless wrongs road users. While being stuck in traffic is nothing like being tied onto train tracks, protestors appear to have used road users as means to pressure the government.

Yet, there is one way such protests can be justified against road users: There may be a duty to "give proper uptake to a protest if and when it is a good-faith response to injustice" (Medina 2022: 104), which involves "not only *knowing* about [the good-faith protest in question] and *feeling* something about it, but also being *responsive and doing* something about it" (114, original emphasis). In the case of climate protest, affected bystanders may have a duty to actively listen to the demands and reasons of the protest, to be properly motivated by the cause, and to exert political pressure on the government to take immediate climate action. To illustrate, the audience should seriously consider

the grievances of the climate protestors, and then take political action, for example, vote for politicians who support a rapid green transition. (Sitting in one's car and completely ignoring the protest, in contrast, fails to fulfil this duty.) If so, members of XR, by putting themselves in harm's way, may be merely adding reasons to bystanders' existing duties.

This potential justification, however, has its limitations. First, if the society in general already supports climate action, and the primary barrier to such actions comes from the influence of fossil fuel companies and politicians who ally with them, then whether there is a further duty to give *more* uptake to protestors may be questionable. For instance, a "clear majority of Australians were overall supportive of local government action on climate change (80% agreement)" (Chou et al. 2024: 5), yet, Australia still keeps exporting coal and approving new fossil fuel extraction projects. Here, the worry is that XR makes further demands on random citizens who have already given sufficient uptake to previous climate protests.

Second, and more importantly, it is crucial to distinguish between good-faith protests and their less-than-good-faith counterparts. Moral circumstances rearrangement isn't an innocuous means anyone could employ for whatever cause. Disobedients can be deeply misguided, typically because they fail to be epistemically responsible in the sense that they fail "to seek to become informed about important topics, to take steps to avoid forming false beliefs, to be careful in their reasoning" (Bryan 2023: 8). In cases of such failure, the duty to give protest uptake may not arise. And when protestors rearrange moral circumstances so that their audience must either be stuck or do something immoral, such protestors do in fact commit moral blackmail.

In general, therefore, in cases of communicative civil disobedience, moral circumstances are rearranged. Whether such acts involve moral blackmail depends on whether there is a duty to give proper uptake to the protests in question. If there is, it may be that through sit-ins, blockades, and

lock-ons, protesters merely give their audience more reason to do what the latter already ought to do. But when there isn't, moral blackmail is committed. I acknowledge that to what extent we must give uptake to epistemically irresponsible protesters may be debatable – even epistemically arrogant dissenters may nevertheless contribute to the epistemic quality of democracy (Madsen 2021), so whether moral blackmail occurs hinges on which theory of “good faith protest” turns out to be correct. However, I see this as a positive feature of my analysis.

### Conclusion

I have proposed that some protestors innocuously rearrange moral circumstances, while others blatantly commit moral blackmail. The key is whether the targets of protest are pressured to do what they already have an all-things-considered reason to do. Direct action, when undertaken for the sake of just ends, appears to be easier to justify. The morality of rearranging moral circumstances for communicative civil disobedience, on the other hand, hinges on the duty to give proper uptake to protests, a duty whose existence may in turn be determined by whether protestors are epistemically responsible.

My analysis has two main takeaways. First, the morality of many widely employed and apparently noble, peaceful, and self-sacrificial protest tactics is far from content-independent; second, even for protests with a just cause, the risk of committing moral blackmail may still be an unsavoury feature that requires further justification. Protestors should thus proceed with caution. Preferably, protests should focus on targets liable to bearing the costs of fixing injustice. Should the innocent be involved, this regrettable feature must be properly acknowledged and addressed.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rowan Cruft, Katie Robertson, and the two anonymous referees for their extremely helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper. The core argument was inspired to me during Sunday service.

## Funding

The open access of this work was supported by the University of Stirling

## Conflict of Interests

My kids would probably benefit if we don't destroy the planet.

## References

- Arridge, A. S. (2023). Should We Blow Up a Pipeline?: Ecotage as Other-Defense. *Environmental Ethics*: 403-425
- Brownlee, K. (2012). *Conscience and Conviction: The Case for Civil Disobedience*. OUP Oxford.
- Bryan, A. (2023). The Epistemic Dimensions of Civil Disobedience. *Journal of Political Philosophy*: 1-21.
- Chou, M., Busbridge, R., & Rutledge-Prior, S. (2024). From the Three Rs to the "Culture Wars"? How Australians Perceive Local Government Action on Climate Change, Indigenous Reconciliation, and LGBTQIA + Advocacy. *Urban Affairs Review*: 10780874241242049.
- Coyne, S. (2024). The Role of Civility in Political Disobedience. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 52(2): 221–250.
- Crummett, D. (2023). Is Abortion the Only Issue? *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy*: 9.
- Delmas, C. (2018). *A Duty to Resist: When Disobedience Should Be Uncivil*. Oxford University Press.
- Delmas, C., & Brownlee, K. (2021). Civil Disobedience. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civil-disobedience/>
- Green, F., & Denniss, R. (2018). Cutting with Both Arms of the Scissors: The Economic and Political Case for Restrictive Supply-Side Climate Policies. *Climatic Change*, 150(1–2): 73–87.
- Keller, S. (2016). Moral Blackmail and the Family. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 13(6): 699–719.
- Keller, S. (2018). Fiduciary Duties and Moral Blackmail. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 35(3): 481–495.

- Lai, T.-H. (2021). Civil disobedience, Costly signals, and Leveraging injustice. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy*: 1083–1108.
- Lai, T.-H., & Lim, C.-M. (2023). Environmental Activism and the Fairness of Costs Argument for Uncivil Disobedience. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*: 1–20.
- Lim, C.-M. (2021). Differentiating Disobedients. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*: 20(2).
- Madsen, T. H. (2021). Are Dissenters Epistemically Arrogant? *Criminal Law and Philosophy*, 15(1): 1–23.
- Markovits, D. (2005). Democratic Disobedience. *Yale Law Journal*, 1897–1952.
- Medina, J. (2022). The Duties to Protest and to Listen to Protest: Communicative Resistance, Enabler’s Responsibility, and Echoing. *Democratic Theory*, 9(2): 101–119.
- Moraro, P. (2014). Respecting Autonomy through the Use of Force: The Case of Civil Disobedience. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 31(1): 63–76.
- Moraro, P. (2019). Punishment, Fair Play and the Burdens of Citizenship. *Law and Philosophy*, 38(3), 289–311.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford University Press.
- Scheuerman, W. E. (2020). Civil Disobedience as an Essentially Contested Concept. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 19: 517–522.
- Smith, W. (2011). Civil Disobedience and the Public Sphere. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 19(2): 145–166.
- Smith, W. (2018). Disruptive Democracy: The Ethics of Direct Action. *Raisons Politiques*, 1: 13–27.
- Vanderheiden, S. (2005). Eco-Terrorism or Justified Resistance? Radical Environmentalism and the “War on Terror.” *Politics & Society*, 33(3): 425–447.
- Welchman, J. (2001). Is Ecosabotage Civil Disobedience? *Philosophy & Geography*, 4(1): 97–107.
- Weltman, D. (2021). Covert Animal Rescue: Civil Disobedience or Subrevolution? *Environmental Ethics*, 43(4): 333–355.