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Carbon Offsets and Concerns About Shifting Harms: A Reply to Elson

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Abstract: Luke Elson defends carbon offsetting on the basis that it is not morally objectionable to shift harms or risks around. As long as emitting and offsetting does not increase the overall harms or risks—and merely shifts them—compared to refraining from emitting, he suggests there is no injustice involved. I respond in several ways, suggesting that the time delay involved in offsetting can increase these risks but, regardless, there is a defensible default which could justify refraining from emitting, even when planning to offset.

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JEL Classification: A13, Q50, Q54

Many of our activities contribute to greenhouse gas emissions—and we know that those emissions drive climate change, with effects that matter for both future and current people. What should we do about this? More specifically, if one is considering a particularly emissions-intensive activity (like flying intercontinentally), is it morally better to refrain or could it be morally equivalent to emit and do the activity as long as one offsets the emissions?[1] A growing literature in climate ethics tackles this question, and Luke Elson (2024) adds another defense of the claim that, morally speaking, emitting and offsetting is equivalent to refraining.

Elson's article has several moving parts. He assumes that there are individual duties to refrain from emitting due to its contribution to cli-

[1] In emphasizing the moral point of view, for the bulk of the paper, I set aside some important factual questions: for example, are the offsets at issue additional and are they permanent? In his shorter precursor opinion, Elson (2018) explicitly assumes that the offsets 'work' to set aside these questions, but, oddly, he does not stipulate this as directly in this paper, simply claiming that emitting plus offsetting makes emissions net zero. I think the most charitable reading is that he intends this assumption to apply here as well, but the assumption bears mentioning because (perhaps) the bulk of objections, even in the climate ethics literature, are *not* moral, but factual (see Baras 2023).

mate change. He also assumes that the way that they contribute is chaotic: increases in the stock of emissions raise the expected likelihood (or actuality) of climate impacts, but there is no guarantee that the same people would be affected so those greater expected impacts could shift the incidence of the impacts.[2] Elson's main interest is in Stefánsson's (2022) argument that the shifted incidence constitutes an injustice: as a result of these actions, people who would not have been harmed will (in expectation) be harmed. To this argument, Elson offers a few responses: (1) this is relevantly different from other kinds of shifting harms because we do not know who will be harmed (so cannot correct any injustice); (2) there is nothing morally privileged about the circumstance where you refrain as opposed to emit and offset; (3) if it is unjust to shift harms from one moral patient to another, the claim overgeneralizes and almost any action with a climate impact is unjust; and finally (4) even supposing these arguments do not succeed since offsets do not immediately work (emissions are immediate, offsets are slower), it is not clear that this is such a strong case against offsets because no actions (in most circumstances) will have immediate emissions effects—most likely, they require market signals which take time to propagate. The suggestion is that it is not clear that refraining has the edge over emitting and offsetting since all of them generally include temporal delays.

I will respond to each of these points, offering various considerations that could undermine his claims. However, I think the most important concerns with offsetting lie elsewhere, and I will close by explicating a couple of these concerns. In short, I believe that, while it is good to offset emissions, serious concerns about additionality mean we should not take those offsets at face value. More fundamentally, I believe that policy and changing incentives is more important than voluntary individual choices, so it is more important that those who are inter-

[2] He actually considers an alternative 'big bucket' model, where impacts are directly determined only by the stock of emissions. In that case, if emitting and offsetting has no net effect on the stock of emissions, impacts do not change and therefore there is no harm. He rhetorically asks whether emitting and offsetting could be wrong if they did no harm, thinking that this addresses this alternative model, but I think it is insufficient. Many non-consequentialists have answers to this rhetorical question and here is a sprinkling: (1) it is vicious or otherwise demonstrates bad character (virtue ethics) (Hourdequin 2010), (2) it is wrong to be part of a group that collectively harms (Parfit 1984), or (3) you have (perhaps imperfect) duties to do your part regardless (Kantian deontology) (Baatz 2014). But the bulk of his article does not adopt the 'big bucket' model, so I will consider his arguments under his main assumption which, for what it is worth, I think more realistic than this 'big bucket' model anyways.

ested in acting on climate change consider policy change rather than arguing about individual choices.

We can start by granting that, although hotly contested (see Baras 2023), the offset will sequester the equivalent greenhouse gases to those generated by my flight (for example, via trees planted). The main claim I want to defend in responding to Elson's four points is that it is still not clear that a justice theorist should be moved by Elson's position.

In response to (1), it seems like a poor defense to causing a potential injustice that you do not know who will be harmed—or even that they do not know that you harmed them. Instead of excusing or negating the injustice, this just seems to add a further injustice, namely, that corrective justice becomes impossible to realize. Elson is right that this is morally relevant difference from most cases of causing harm, but it does not seem like a difference that *reduces* moral concern.

In response to (2), for many deontologists, there is a very important distinction between circumstances where you refrain as opposed to emitting and offsetting: in one case, you allow harms to be done and, in the other case, you do harm. For those theorists, it is worse to do morally objectionable things such as put people at risk than to allow them to be done (when they are caused by other agents). If this is the case, there is a morally relevant difference between refraining (not doing, but perhaps allowing, injustice) and emitting plus offsetting (doing or causing injustice).

But even from a non-deontological, commonsense point of view, I think there is a good reason for thinking that refraining and not emitting is a privileged baseline. Suppose I am considering buying a lottery ticket and am close to indifferent between buying it or not, since I think the expected benefit is roughly equivalent to the cost. You come along and say, 'Well, if you are unsure or close to unsure, there's a default: not buying a lottery ticket.' I retort: 'Wait a minute, I've been spending money all my life. Why should I stop now? There was nothing metaphysically privileged about the amount of money I've spent before, so from the point of view of money, why not just keep spending?' It seems to me that this is a very weird kind of response; yes, it is true that the current set of emissions is not morally or metaphysically privileged. But I believe the average person would think there is a default in a case where you are considering spending more money or potentially causing harm: not to spend it or not to intervene.

We could even explain these privileged baselines with a couple rationales. First, we might think that merely putting people at risk of harm is itself unjust or morally objectionable even when the risk does not eventuate (Placani 2017: Herington 2017: Parr and Slavny 2019).[3] Some justice theorists might be sympathetic to this claim, and if adopted it would reinforce the position that refraining is privileged

Second, we might think that it is rationally permissible to be risk-averse, in which case emitting plus offsetting introduces a new risk and a new benefit, but they do not cancel each other out.[4] Even if the same size along some metric, one might judge the risk of harm is more weighty than the same sized chance of benefit. Thus, if someone thinks that rationally being put at risk for a given sized impure (for example, financial) benefit has a greater absolute value than the risk of obtaining a benefit of the same (for example, financial) size, then they might rationally reject being put at risk even when there is an offsetting reduction in risk.

In response to (3), I agree with Elson that someone who thinks shifting harms *always* constitutes an injustice would face a worrying over-generalization concern (as almost any changed emissions in a complex system likely generates a variety of chaotic outcomes), but I think there is a more plausible intermediate position a justice theorist could take which need not imply this conclusion.

If a theorist believed that any time a harm was shifted and someone else is harmed, then all kinds of actions which generate emissions with chaotic effects would (at least in expectation) harm people who were not previously at risk. A certain kind of strong separateness of persons view, whereby any action which harms one person is impermissible, regardless of which benefits others received, would have this problematic implication.

But someone might have a more moderate separateness of persons view, whereby it is not always an injustice to bring harm to some people and benefit others, and thereby this person would not have to accept

[3] For what it is worth, I am personally not that sympathetic to this rationale: I think actual harms matter and that, in any circumstances where improved counterfactual (merely possible) security has any actual (this world) costs, we should sacrifice counterfactual security (Mintz-Woo 2018).

[4] Recently, positions like this have been championed by Lara Buchak (2013). For what it is worth, this would be challenging to apply to this case if we think the exact same outcomes are subject to increased and decreased risk. However, due to the chaotic nature of the system, rational risk-aversion could make a new distribution of risk (even with the same mean and median) more objectionable.

this overgeneralization. How could such a moderate person separate (excuse me) their view from the strong view? One obvious candidate threshold is whether the expected justice (or benefit) outweighs the expected injustice (or harm). The motivation for this threshold is straightforward: the world has a lot of injustice, but it is justified to act to try to reduce its level. With this threshold, there is no reason to emit and offset, since the expected harm or resulting injustice is not reduced (it is merely shifted around). However, there is potentially a reason to perform other acts of mitigation, even when chaotic climatic impacts means that these mitigation actions will likely put other agents at risk: the justification is that reducing injustice (or harm) is usually permissible (modulo the means of actions which are ruled out by deontic side-constraints, say).

What is the upshot of this argument? It looks like this more moderate position has both a clear and justifiable threshold and does not license emitting and offsetting (because this at best keeps harms and justice overall at the same level) while explaining why regular mitigation is allowed, even though some new risks are introduced. Furthermore, this moderate position does take the potential injustice of shifting harms seriously, although perhaps more as a tie-breaker than a decisive or dispositive consideration.[5]

Finally, in response to (4), it is true that refraining from actions that generate emissions rarely *immediately* leads to emissions reductions. So if I do not fly or do not buy meat products on some given occasion, the way this could reduce emissions is often something about market signals as opposed to some specific emissions that I personally generate or not. And any emissions reductions resulting from these market signals may indeed be delayed from the particular consumer action or choice (it may even be true that in general actual emissions reductions are not co-temporaneous with the relevant actions or choices).[6]

But while it is true that both offsetting and emitting may generally involve delays, there are very good reasons to think that these delays will not be a wash and that offsetting will be more delayed than the emitting. Let us start with the paradigm cases given by Elson. On the

[5] This is a very simple moderate view, but of course one could easily construct more complex ones that require 'significant' reductions in injustice before allowing shifting harms. Reflective equilibrium could reveal other more complex moderate views, but this simple view acts as a proof-of-concept.

[6] Of course, if so, this truth would be general but not universal. If I make the choice not to light a campfire or not to turn on a propane barbeque, there are immediate emissions reductions.

emitting side, we have an international flight. It is true that Elson's choosing not to fly across the pond is very unlikely (not impossible!)[7] to stop a particular flight from flying, but it might (if at some relevant tipping point) trigger someone to decide to fly some route less often (or some similar decision) in the future. However, it would be very unlikely that this would compare in terms of temporal scale to the paradigm example of offsetting, planting trees, which have lifespans of carbon sequestration measured in decades (or even centuries).[8] The orders of temporal magnitude are very distinct.

But, more generally, modern supply chains are more responsive than either one might expect or than was true in the past. There are two key drivers. First, just-in-time manufacturing (which originated in postwar Japan and became dominant around the new millennium) involves production that responds to changes in demand on very short timescales. Second, algorithmic pricing for certain kinds of goods and services (especially something like our paradigmatic flight) means that new demand (even new *projected* demand, like searches for particular routes) is rapidly reflected in displayed prices. What does this mean? It means that, on the margin, individual choices can affect the prices (and, on the margin, the purchases) of other travelers almost instantaneously. Many other types of goods, especially homogenous goods traded on global markets, are also subject to this kind of rapid price signal proliferation. Relevant to the climate issue, the first amongst equals of such globally traded goods is Brent crude oil. So changes in demand, even small ones, can influence global prices quite rapidly. In short, one's choice to emit or refrain might not immediately lead to a change of emissions in the specific activity you were considering, but the demand signal can propagate much more rapidly than one might expect.

This means that emitting plus offsetting—even when the offsetting captures the same volume of emissions—involves some period where there are more emissions in the system than would be the case with refraining. That period will involve more climate harms in expectation.

But of course this all assumes that offsetting is truly additional (it reduces emissions that would not have been removed if the offsetting was not performed). A growing body of research warns that additionali-

[7] I have personally booked flights that were cancelled days or weeks before the flight, and I believe the most likely explanation is lack of demand.

[8] Jamieson (2014) was, I believe, the first to point out the biophysical differences between combusted carbon and carbon sequestered in trees in responding to Broome's (2012) argument.

ty is not met with a large number of reforestation projects including ones involved in large-scale influential offsetting schemes (West et al. 2020; West et al. 2023). This is another good reason to believe emitting plus offsetting is better than emitting, but considerably short of refraining.

This leads to a meta-concern about framing. As moral philosophers, we tend to be drawn to questions about what duties individuals have or what ought an individual do.[9] But most individuals are not morally motivated (at least in the context of climate change) and even for those who are, it is very difficult for them to understand what would actually be effective for them to do. (Note that I *do* think individual actions can make a difference; I just think that moral motivation and epistemic resources to drive individual action are scarce.) For that reason, and given the urgency of the problem, I think that what is needed are *policies* that change incentives so that there are reasons for green choices by people who are neither morally motivated nor sufficiently informed to make those choices on their own. There are a range of such policies, from command-and-control instruments to carbon taxes and cap-and-trade, but the key difference is that these are not voluntary like carbon offsets. Their involuntary nature means that, if adopted, we would not have to rely on moral motivation for behavioral change. Furthermore, I believe they are morally defensible, although they raise some interesting issues (Mintz-Woo 2022).

So let me end with a plea for a philosophical refocus on policies and incentives. My belief is that moral philosophers can have the most impact on this important issue by focusing on the ethics or political philosophy of policies—and I strongly believe that many of us ultimately want to contribute to reducing, and not merely shifting, climate harms.

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[9] Obviously, there are many philosophers working on the ethical policy questions I suggest, but my concern is that, relatively speaking, too much ink is being spilled on climate inefficacy and individual offsetting.

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