

Climate Change, Individual Emissions, and Agent-Regret

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Some philosophers are skeptical that individuals are morally blameworthy for their own greenhouse gas emissions (Sinnott-Armstrong 2010). Although an individual's emissions may contribute to climate change that is on the whole very harmful, perhaps that contribution is too trivial to render it morally impermissible. Against this view, there have been attempts to show that an individual's lifetime emissions cause non-trivial harm (Nolt 2011), but in this paper I will consider what follows if it is true that an individual is not blameworthy for her emissions. Specifically, I ask how a non-blameworthy emitter would best regard (in a moral sense) his or her own emissions. I will argue that the appropriate attitude to adopt here is one of agent-regret. This allows us to capture the moral disvalue of one's emissions without entailing blame for them.

Suppose that Walter Sinnott-Armstrong is correct that taking a Sunday afternoon drive just for fun is not morally blameworthy (Sinnott-Armstrong 2010). Of course, this view might be mistaken (Hiller 2011), but I wish to examine an implication of it, so I shall assume for the sake of argument that certain emitting activities are indeed blameless. It would be dissatisfying for the moral story to end there, however. Many of us think that there still would be something morally disvaluable about this activity and that we have moral reasons to avoid it. The simplest way to underwrite these thoughts, declaring the activity to be impermissible, is off the table here. Fortunately, identifying the activity as impermissible is not the only way to do this.

As I shall understand it, agent-regret is an attitude whereby one regrets some action one has performed. As Susan Wolf suggests, agent-regret is "a special form of sadness or pain accompanying the wish that things had been otherwise with regard to something with which

one's agency was somehow involved" (2001, 16). Often, although perhaps not necessarily, such regret is felt in cases of non-culpability, as in Bernard Williams' example of the truck driver who, despite operating his vehicle in a safe manner, strikes and kills a child who has run into the road. We judge that the driver is morally faultless in this case, that he has done no moral wrong. Yet it is appropriate for the driver to harbor regret for the death of the child, and this regret will differ in kind from that of a mere onlooker. Even though he did no wrong, the driver caused the death of the child. We have *agent*-regret in the case of the driver because he regrets that *his* action resulted in the bad outcome. The mere onlooker played no causal role in bringing about that bad effect, and while she might regret that the death occurred, it is not appropriate for her to feel agent-regret.

Agent-regret can—but need not—involve a wish that one had acted differently within some set of circumstances. But what is more interesting in the context of climate change is that agent-regret can also involve a wish that the circumstances themselves had been different, for example that a more diverse range of options had been available in some situation. As Williams says, "Regret necessarily involves a wish that things had been otherwise, for instance that one had not had to act as one did. But it does not necessarily involve the wish, all things taken together, that one had acted otherwise" (Williams 1976, 127). I will return to this thought below.

Some cases call for agent-regret. Imagine that our truck does not regret the fact that *he* killed the child. He argues that, since it is not his fault that the child died, there is no reason for him to feel differently about it than some random onlooker—that is, he regrets the child's death and judges it to be a misfortune, but he does not regret the role his own agency played in bringing about that death. As Williams says, we would feel "some doubt" about such a person (1976, 124). We are likely to think that the driver should regret that it was *his* action that caused

(at least in part) that bad outcome, although it is reasonable for the driver to abstain from holding himself morally blameworthy.

It is plausible to think that non-blameworthy emitters—if, as I am assuming here, there are any—should feel agent-regret for their emissions. This view allows us to hold onto the difficult-to-resist thought that it is bad (in some moral sense) to emit greenhouse gases but without entailing that one's emissions are impermissible or that they render the emitter blameworthy. One reason why it is morally bad to emit is that our emissions will contribute to a phenomenon that involves substantial moral disvalue, including harm to innocent subjects and unjust distributions of climate-sensitive goods. Agent-regret is exactly what non-blameworthy emitters need to experience in order to avoid being like the truck driver who does not regret that his action killed the child. Imagine a Satisfied Emitter who reasons that, because she is not morally culpable for her emissions, there is no reason why she should regret the role she played in bringing about climate change and its morally disvaluable features. She allows that climate change is a bad thing and expresses the wish that it not occur, but she feels no regret for the causal contribution she has made to bringing it about. Many of us would find this stance troubling. The ordinary way of responding—i.e., showing that the Satisfied Emitter actually is morally culpable for her emissions—is blocked in this case, since we are assuming that the Satisfied Emitter indeed is not at fault. An agent-regret account is attractive here. Without blaming the Satisfied Emitter for her emissions, we can point out that she nonetheless lacks an attitude that it would be morally good for her to possess, one that allows her to acknowledge the fact that she has helped to cause morally bad effects. This is a virtue of the agent-regret account. Of course, although the claim is plausible, one might well ask *why* it would be morally good to possess this attitude. I do not take a position on this, because that would require

adopting some controversial position in ethical theory, which I would be unable to defend in this short paper.

Now there is a question regarding what conditions some emitter must meet in order for it to be appropriate that he feel merely agent-regret for his emissions. For one thing, the emitter in question must not be morally blameworthy for those emissions. If he is blameworthy, then the appropriate attitude for him to take would be something other than, or possibly in addition to, agent-regret, such as guilt. So answering the question of which emitters should feel merely agent-regret will depend in part on how we are to distinguish between blameworthy and non-blameworthy emitters, a controversial question that I shall not attempt to resolve here. At the same time, it may not be the case that *all* faultless emissions call for agent-regret, such as emissions that are unavoidable in the pursuit of some important good (e.g., operating an ambulance in an emergency). My target in this paper are those emissions that, though faultless, still strike us as morally questionable.

I propose that it is appropriate for us to feel agent-regret more frequently and for a much wider range of emitting actions than we typically suppose. Take Sinnott-Armstrong's example of going for an afternoon drive. This does not usually strike us as a morally charged decision—yet it should, given the link between the drive's emissions and the moral ills of climate change. If we conclude that there is nothing impermissible about going for the drive, we should still regret the fact that our doing so contributes to bad outcomes. Many other actions involving emissions will be similar, and so a large class of actions will call for agent-regret. Taking this call seriously would constitute a very substantial change in the way most individuals regard their emissions.

This widespread turn to agent-regret would admittedly involve a loss on the side of the regretting agents. Actions previously viewed as morally unproblematic are no longer seen this way. It is unpleasant to confront in a serious manner the bad effects that one's emissions help

cause, and it could be a burden to do so for all of one's emitting activities. On the one hand, this is a cost of my proposal, since it brings a serious loss for the agent. But in our current world it may be unavoidable. We can only retain our previous assuredness that our emitting activities are morally unproblematic by ignoring the truth. On the agent-regret view, we should accept this truth, despite the pain it entails for us. If this brings a heavy burden, perhaps it is one we should bear.

But that aside, the move to agent-regret might also play a more positive, motivational role. If I am serious about regretting my individual emissions, it is likely that I will have some motivation either to reduce my future emissions or to address the circumstances that drive my emissions. Indeed, if I had no such motivation, we would have grounds to doubt that I genuinely harbor agent-regret for my emissions, since wishing is built into such regret. Of course, reducing my non-culpable emissions is not morally obligatory, since we are assuming here that the emissions in question are not impermissible. But that is compatible with judging a reduction in my emissions to be a moral good, something I have reason to pursue even if I am not required to do so.

Such agent-regret might also motivate us to change the background conditions that make emissions-intensive activities attractive, such as our heavy reliance on fossil fuels for transportation. As I noted above, agent-regret can include the attitude of regretting that one had no choice but to act under certain conditions, such as the social-political environment within which we find ourselves. This type of regret might underwrite a desire to change those conditions, which in turn might facilitate larger social movements to alter such background conditions. If enough of us come to regard our emissions with agent-regret, and if agent-regret plays the motivational role I think it does, then it is at least reasonable to hope that our background conditions will improve. At any rate, we can expect some type of moral motivation

reliably to accompany agent-regret for our emissions, for that attitude involves genuinely wishing that things were otherwise.

I will close by briefly considering objections to my account. First, one might object in the following way:

Objection 1: Agent-regret is usually reserved for cases in which the bad effect is

practically unavoidable. The truck driver, for example, has no way of knowing that a child will run into the road just at that moment, and so there is no way for him to avert the bad effect. Individual emissions are not like that. We know that our emissions contribute to climate change and thus lead to many bad effects, and we usually have the ability to avoid or reduce emitting activities. So there is a disanalogy between emitting activities and those activities that are paradigm cases for agent-regret, and this makes it unclear that agent-regret is the appropriate attitude to take toward our (faultless) emissions.

Yet short of quite extreme lifestyle changes that can take a heavy toll (e.g., on our relationships and careers), many of us are practically unable to avoid substantial emissions. If we are to enjoy and pursue certain important goods, we often have little choice but to emit, given facts about our current, carbon-intensive society. While these facts hold, it seems appropriate for emitters to view their faultless emissions with agent-regret, for those emissions are often practically necessary to pursue important goods. To be clear, I am not arguing here that these facts make substantial emissions morally permissible, but rather that the practical unavoidability of some emitting activities makes those activities relevantly similar to other cases in which we take agent-regret to be appropriate.

A second potential objection runs as follows:

Objection 2: It only makes sense to feel an amount of agent-regret corresponding to that portion of moral disvalue for which one is causally responsible. But the quantity of any individual's emissions will be trivial compared to the total emissions driving climate change. Accordingly, while climate change as a whole is likely to be very bad, any individual's causal contribution to climate change will be minor. Therefore, if one should feel any agent-regret for one's emissions, that regret should be fairly slight, corresponding to the fairly slight amount of moral disvalue for which the individual's emissions are causally responsible.

Two responses to this objection seem reasonable. First, while one's causal contribution to climate change might be *relatively* slight, the share of moral disvalue caused by one's own emissions—especially if aggregated over a lifetime—could be quite high, say by causing approximately two additional persons to die (Nolt 2011). Plausibly, this effect would be sufficiently bad to call for a substantial degree of agent-regret. Second, one might regret the *collective* action in which one took part. There is no serious doubt that the totality of anthropogenic emissions will have very bad effects. Here one does not regret merely his individual “share” of the bad effects, but rather the full bad effects he has helped to bring about. On either of these responses, it is plausible that the emitter should feel more than just a trivial degree of agent-regret.

A third objection:

Objection 3: Feeling agent-regret for our faultless emissions is a waste of resources.

Rather than regretting one's role in climate change and wishing that things were otherwise, our energy would be better spent on looking for ways to reduce overall emissions and to ameliorate harms that result from anthropogenic emissions.

This objection overlooks the positive, motivational role that agent-regret plausibly plays. There is no conflict between harboring agent-regret regarding some harm and working to ameliorate that harm. In fact, because agent-regret necessarily involves a kind of wishing, it reliably underwrites some motivation to address such harm, say by working to change background conditions that make the harm in question difficult to avoid. Moreover, harboring agent-regret is not a matter of wallowing in (ineffectual) misery. Rather, it involves recognizing one's causal role in bringing about a bad outcome and wishing that this had not been so. This does not carry the potentially destructive feelings of shame or guilt. Because of the reliable motivation built into agent-regret, we are not wasting resources when we feel it, but rather adopting an attitude that moves us to do precisely the sorts of things the objection urges.

A fourth objection:

Objection 4: The proposal that we harbor agent-regret for morally faultless emissions

includes an odd tension. On the one hand, the proposal assumes that certain individual emissions are indeed faultless. Then it directs us to adopt an attitude of agent-regret toward such emissions. If one does not feel agent-regret in such a case, then presumably that person is blameworthy for failing to adopt the appropriate attitude. But it is very odd to be blameworthy for failing to regret an action that is not itself blameworthy.

This objection supposes that we can be blameworthy for not harboring agent-regret in appropriate cases. As Williams says, we may feel “some doubt” about such a person, but I do not assume that such a person would be morally culpable. I have claimed that agent-regret is appropriate to feel, but I do not assume that it is obligatory to adopt this attitude. Failing to do so may be morally disvaluable in certain ways, but something can be morally disvaluable without entailing blame. My position is that we have good moral reason to adopt agent-regret regarding our faultless emissions. I do not make the stronger claim that we are obligated to do so, and for this reason my view avoids the tension claimed by the fourth objection.

Lastly, one might object as follows:

Objection 5: It is unclear what the allegedly blameless emitter is supposed to regret, especially if regret involves a wish that circumstances had been otherwise. This gives rise to a further concern, namely that the agent-regret account could be used as an excuse for emissions, potentially making climate change worse than it would be otherwise.

In response, I claim that the blameless emitter should regret the background conditions that make her emissions practically unavoidable, whatever those might be. Importantly, I make no claim in this paper about what types of emissions are in fact morally permissible, if any. My claim is only that, if there are morally blameless emissions, then emitters thereof should regret the conditions that made them practically unavoidable, such as economic facts about one’s society or personal situation. This allows for a response to the second part of the objection as well. My account does not sanction using regret as an excuse for emissions that are *not*

practically unavoidable, such as those of affluent persons who can readily afford alternative energy.

I have argued that an agent-regret account for how individuals should regard their non-culpable emissions is attractive. We have reason not to be Satisfied Emitters and instead should regret the role we play in contributing to climate change and its moral ills.¹

References

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