please cite published version:

in Jeremy Moss (ed.), *Climate Change and Justice* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.148-64.

**Acts, Omissions, Emissions**

Garrett Cullity

On at least four grounds, it can be argued that we ought to be reducing our carbon emissions in order to mitigate the impact of harmful climate change. The first is an argument from collective prudence: we ought to avert harm that we will otherwise suffer. The other three are moral arguments. There is an argument from intragenerational harm: the emissions produced by some of those now living will harm other members of the current global population. There is an argument from intergenerational fairness: our generation is greedily using up a greater share of the earth’s resources, including its atmospheric carbon-carrying resources, than we are willing to leave to those who will come after us. And there is also an argument from intergenerational harm, which simply insists that we ought not to act now in a way that will harm those who will live later.[[1]](#endnote-2)

When these arguments are made, who are “we”? There are various candidates – the whole global population across time, all those now alive, the high-emitting subset of the world’s current population, all the high emitters who will ever live – and the arguments just listed seem to target different ones. However, you and I are members of all of those groups. If those arguments are forceful (as I think they are), then what moral implications does that carry for our actions as individuals?

**I: Difference-Making and Participatory Derivations**

There are apparently cases in which, although a group is not doing what it ought to do, no individual member of the group acts wrongly. That is true even when the “ought” is moral. For example, when one group has a special duty to another – say, a duty to apologize for past wrongs – it may not be possible for an individual member to do what the group ought to do (what may be needed is an apology by the Australian government, not by an individual Australian citizen), and it may be supererogatory for any individual to get the group to do what it ought.[[2]](#endnote-3)

According to some writers, anthropogenic climate change is another example of group wrongdoing without individual wrongdoing. They argue that here, the actions of one individual make no difference to global climate change. So even if all four arguments establish that *we* ought collectively to reduce our carbon emissions, I do not act morally wrongly in not reducing mine.[[3]](#endnote-4)

However, that is too fast. It is probably true that my carbon-emitting actions make no difference to anyone else’s welfare. But it does not follow that they are not morally wrong. That inference is blocked in two ways. First, an action can be wrong not because of the actual harm it does but because of the expected harm associated with it – that is, the sum arrived at by multiplying the value of each possible outcome of the action by its probability. I discuss that issue in Section III. But secondly, even when your action does not even have an expectation of harm, it can still be wrong because of its relationship to what we do together. There can be what I shall call a “participatory derivation” of the wrongness of your action from facts about what we ought to do and your actual or potential participation in our doing it, independently of the effects of your individual action or inaction. This is one of the things that may be meant when it is claimed that I bear a “mediated” responsibility for climate change – a responsibility mediated by my membership of a group that either causes it or can prevent it.[[4]](#endnote-5) The main aim in what follows will be to see whether this thought stands up to closer examination.

Participatory derivations can be distinguished into two broad kinds, positive and negative. In cases of the positive kind, a group ought to be doing something, it is doing it, and I ought to join in, bearing my share of the burden of the collective action. Under exactly what conditions that is true is disputed;[[5]](#endnote-6) but most moral philosophers recognize cases of “free riding” on others’ production of public goods that are morally wrong. If we ought to cooperate in digging a well for our village, and I leave it to others to dig it but then help myself to the water afterwards, I am behaving wrongly. To justify not joining in, I would need to argue that we ought not to dig the well; once I accept that we ought to do so, taking a free ride is wrong.[[6]](#endnote-7) This is wrong because it is unfair. The free rider arrogates a special privilege to himself – the privilege of taking a good without paying – while relying for the existence of that good on others’ willingness to pay. And this can be true when the free rider harms no-one. If I sneak into a theatre without paying, I might impede no other theatregoer’s enjoyment (indeed, I might enhance it, if I clap at the right times). The moral complaint against me is not that my action harms anyone. It is that I am failing to contribute what is required from similarly situated people if the group is to function as it ought.

Participatory derivations can also take a negative form. In these cases, there is something we ought *not* to be doing, and I am joining in our doing it. Suppose a gang has dragged someone into a building to assault him, and I am asked to guard the door and shout a warning if the police arrive. If I agree, I become complicit in the assault: I make myself a member (even if a minor one) of the gang that perpetrates it. But here, too, my actions may make no actual or even expected difference to the victim’s welfare. Perhaps no police arrive; I shout no warning; had I declined, someone else would have taken my place. Nonetheless, I remain morally accountable for joining the group that perpetrates the assault. The victim can rightly complain that I was one of the gang that assaulted him.[[7]](#endnote-8)

Sections IV and V examine whether a participatory derivation of either of these two types can support the conclusion that individuals’ energy-consuming activities are wrong. Both need to be considered. Not constraining my own personal carbon emissions might be characterized either as a failure to join in what we collectively ought to be doing (moderating our emissions) or joining in what we ought not to be doing (emitting at levels that cause climate change). I shall identify what I think is the strongest such derivation; but my conclusion will be that it is hard to see how to make it completely convincing.

**II: Wrongness**

I should first spell out how *wrongness* is being thought of in this discussion. There are different ways of thinking of the force of the complaint that an action is morally wrong and why it matters. Although it can be tempting to ask which one is correct, what seems more constructive is to identify the differences between them, and specify the one you are following.

A full list of conceptions of wrongness would have many members, no doubt, but three prominent ones are these. On an optimization conception, wrong action is suboptimal action: the force of complaining that an action is wrong is that it is not as good as some alternative. On a compliance conception, morality consists in a set of proscriptions, and for an action to be wrong is for it to be proscribed by that set: the force of complaining that an action is wrong is that it fails to comply with the commands imposed by morality. On what we can call “adequate reasons” conceptions, wrong action is action that fails to respond adequately to the other-regarding reasons bearing on it. On a view of this third kind, the force of complaining that an action is wrong is that it treats others unjustifiably.

Adequate reasons conceptions of wrongness are a family of different views, which offer different ways of specifying what it is to respond “adequately” and what makes a reason “other-regarding”. The “others” in question might be restricted to rational agents, human beings or sentient creatures, or extended to include the non-sentient environment or precious objects in general. And the “adequacy” of my response might be specified by reference simply to the relative strengths of the reasons for and against the action;[[8]](#endnote-9) to whether the action calls for reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation and blame;[[9]](#endnote-10) to a publicity condition, concerning the reasons that must be recognized as prevailing if our interaction is to be governed by the exchange of reasons rather than coercion;[[10]](#endnote-11) or to whether the action meets the demands of second-person accountability we are entitled to address to each other.[[11]](#endnote-12)

Here, I shall prescind from such differences, important though they are. They are rival ways of filling out a core idea – that the relations in which we stand to others provide us with reasons and that an important concern, expressible by talking about wrongness, is that our treatment of others should be justifiable in the light of those reasons. My question about wrongness will be whether our individual actions meet that general demand. (I shall use “moral requirements” to refer to what it is morally wrong not to do.) I began by pointing out some of the ways in which a harmless action can fail to meet that demand. We should now examine them in more detail.

**III: Expected Harm and Benefit**

The expectation of harm associated with an actually harmless action can make it wrong: reckless and negligent actions illustrate that. This provokes a first line of reply to the argument that an individual’s carbon-emitting action makes no difference and therefore cannot be wrong.[[12]](#endnote-13) According to the best understanding of the current science, the carbon we put into the atmosphere already causes harm and will continue to do so.[[13]](#endnote-14) Increasing global temperatures are correlated with an increasing incidence of extreme weather events – bushfires, floods, storms, droughts and heatwaves – which cause death, injury and distress. It is true that the causal structure of weather systems is too chaotic to allow us to attribute particular events of those kinds to particular emissions, and that some emissions may well prevent such events. But there tend to be more of those events as the earth gets warmer, and putting more carbon into the atmosphere tends to make it warmer. Given this correlation, my emissions, by adding carbon molecules to the atmosphere, have some probability of triggering a harmful event of this kind, and it is greater than the probability of preventing one. This probability is very small, but the harm if such an event is triggered is very large. So there is some number of deaths that represents the expected harm produced by my emissions. One attempt to quantify this puts it at one to two deaths over my lifetime; another, at shortening others’ lives by two to three days per year of emissions.[[14]](#endnote-15) It cannot be inferred from this that I cause that amount of harm.[[15]](#endnote-16) I probably cause no harm. But that does not exonerate me, if the expected harm is significant.

However, deriving a conclusion about wrongness from this line of thought is not straightforward. Consider an analogy. Unsurprisingly, there is a correlation between ambient noise levels and the incidence of aggressive behaviour.[[16]](#endnote-17) There is therefore some small probability that my contribution to the overall level of ambient noise will trigger a violent incident. I could reduce that probability by being quieter. Indeed, I could reduce it to zero, “offsetting” my contribution by quietening some other significant source of noise. However, it is hard to take seriously the idea that I act wrongly in not doing so. Although we have no figures, the expectation of harm seems too small in comparison to the effort it would take to reduce it, and the causal contribution to harm too remote, to make it a reasonable object of complaint.

That does not refute the case for thinking that the associated expectation of harm makes individuals’ carbon-emission behaviour wrong. It is easy enough to see that that case is stronger than the corresponding one for ambient noise-making, in all three of the dimensions that need to be compared. The expectation of harm is greater. The associated cost is modest: paying $550 will offset 25 tonnes of personal carbon dioxide emissions, we are told.[[17]](#endnote-18) And the causal contribution is less remote. When violence is triggered by ambient noise, the causal contribution of the person who strikes the blows dwarfs that of a background noise-maker. But when carbon emissions cause a hurricane, there is no intermediate harmful agent.

However, while it is obvious that the case is stronger, is it strong enough? Once we have quantified the expected harm and the cost of offsetting it, there are three more things to do. We need to compare the relative sizes of those two magnitudes. We need to assess the centrality or remoteness of the causal contribution of current carbon emissions to future harm. For example, if an elderly person dies in a future heat wave, we face the question how to apportion the relative contributions of past carbon emitters, the lack of precautions by the person and his relatives who know about the hotter environment, and the failure of health services to adapt. And having made the first comparison and the second assessment, we need to relate them to each other. It is hard to know how to do those things. One possibility would be to look for a similarly structured case in which factors of the same magnitude were associated with obviously wrong action; but I cannot see how to do that.

Another issue adds to the complexity. Suppose you do offset all your emissions, and eradicate the expectation of harm associated with your actions.[[18]](#endnote-19) You now face a further question. You have important other-regarding reasons not just to avoid harming other people, but to benefit them. Failing to act in a way that has a chance of saving other people’s lives at comparatively small cost to you can be wrong too – even when the threat has been caused by someone else. So if you are sufficiently convinced by the argument from expected harm to offset your own emissions, you need next to ask yourself why you are not going further and offsetting other people’s. Arguably, the reason you have to perform actions with an expectation of preventing harm is weaker than the reason not to perform actions with the corresponding expectation of harm; the cost of offsetting other people’s emissions as well is greater than the cost of only offsetting your own; and if you do not, your causal contribution to future harms that result from other people’s emissions is more remote than to those resulting from your own. If so, the case for the wrongness of not doing this is weaker. But until we know how to measure the bearing that these three factors have relative to each other on the wrongness of action, we cannot conclude that the latter case is too weak to establish a conclusion of wrongness – nor that the former case is strong enough.

**IV: Not Joining in What We Should be Doing**

An argument that individual emissions are wrong because of the associated expectation of harm is a non-participatory derivation. It applies to me independently of my membership of any group. If I inhabited a world in which the same atmospheric composition had not been caused by humans, and I somehow faced carbon emission choices all on my own, the same considerations would apply. But now let us examine the prospects for a participatory derivation. We can start with the first, positive kind.

In this kind of case, my action is wrong because it is a failure to join in an action we ought to be performing. Free riding was cited to illustrate this: this is wrong because it treats unfairly those who do join in – even if it does not reduce anyone’s welfare.

Notice that this involves a derivation from what we ought prudentially to do to what I am required morally to do. When we ought to dig a well, the “ought” need not be moral: it suffices that the action furthers our collective interests. But the requirement on me is a moral requirement, of fairness.

Positive participatory derivations extend beyond cases of free riding, however.[[19]](#endnote-20) Suppose someone is drowning, and eight of us standing on the beach could save him by rowing a lifeboat together. Then we ought to do that. This time, the “ought” is moral; but again, there is a participatory derivation. If I decline to join in, leaving the other seven to do the work, then I am acting wrongly. Here too, I cannot exonerate myself by pointing out that the victim will still be saved and that, although the others will have to work a bit harder without my participation, this will not harm them in any significant way. The complaint against me is not that my behaviour makes a significant difference to anyone’s welfare. It is, again, that I am failing to contribute to what we together ought to be doing. It is only because the others do not think and act like me that the victim is saved. However, I am not free riding – helping myself to a good produced by the group. And here, it seems unsatisfactory to explain the wrongness of my action solely by saying that I treat the rescuers unfairly. An account of who I am mistreating cannot just mention the rescuers: it must include the victim. The moral complaint against me is best put disjunctively. I am either treating the victim callously, failing to accept that his life must be saved; or treating the other rescuers unfairly, leaving them to do the work while arrogating to myself the privilege of not contributing.

Apparently, then, positive participatory derivations cover a range of different cases. More work would be needed to settle exactly how extensive this range is. Does it include cases in which a group action confers a benefit on me without my having actively sought it? And just what determines when a group that ought to be doing something includes me? However, we do not need to address those questions here. Before we reach them, there is already a powerful obstacle to generating moral requirements on individuals in relation to climate change in this way.

This is simply that a derivation of this form does not generate unilateral moral requirements. In a positive participatory derivation, I am required *to join in* what we collectively ought to be doing. If we are not doing it, then there is no collective action for me to join in, and therefore no basis for a complaint that I am unfairly failing to do so. If we ought to be digging the well but are not, I am not morally required to make a hole in the ground that corresponds to my share of the work of actually digging a well together; if we ought to be rescuing the drowning person but are not, I am not morally required to get in the lifeboat by myself and row in a circle.

The problem for a positive participatory derivation in the case of climate change, then, is simple. The global population ought to be regulating our economy to contain carbon emissions. But we are not. So there is no collective action which I am failing to join. Unilaterally constraining my own carbon emissions is like sitting in the lifeboat by myself and rowing in a circle.

There is a reply, however. When a large-scale problem requires a large-scale collective action that is not being performed, smaller-scale collective actions may still address part of the overall problem. If so, a positive participatory derivation can still generate a moral requirement to join in the smaller-scale action. Perhaps many drowning people need to be saved by launching many lifeboats, but there are only enough willing rowers to launch one. Then I cannot join a grand collective action that saves everyone; but I should still join the crew of the one boat that will save some.

The application to carbon emissions is this. I cannot join effective worldwide action on the scale needed to arrest climate change. But I can join the many individuals worldwide who are living carbon-neutral lives. Their collective action will not avert the dangers of climate change fully. But it contributes towards averting those dangers, so I should join in, rather than leaving that work to them.

In fact, there are four distinguishable arguments of this type to consider. (1) Those who are leading carbon-neutral lives produce a public good. They ought to do that for reasons of collective prudence, and since they confer a benefit on me, I am unfairly free riding if I decline to join them. (2) They are preventing harm to vulnerable people, both now and in the future. They ought to do that for reasons of beneficence, and my refusal to join in is wrong in the same way as refusing to join the lifeboat crew would be. (3) While the high-emitting members of the world’s population use a greater share of the earth’s resources than they are leaving to future generations, this group does not. This group’s actions do not leave the world in worse shape than they found it: they ought to perform those actions for reasons of fairness. There is a derivative requirement of fairness on me to join in, rather than leaving to others the work of doing what we ought. (4) The large-scale action that is needed to address climate change is effective regulation of the global economy. When that is not happening, we face the question what we ought to do to encourage it. If the lifeboat is not being launched, I should not simply walk off the beach; I should see whether I can gather a group to launch it. And if rowing the lifeboat in a circle will shame the others into joining in, then I *should* do that. By leading carbon-neutral lives, we can send a political signal that makes effective global regulation likelier. So we ought to do that, and I ought to join in rather than leaving the work to others.

However, each of these arguments faces problems. According to (1), in benefiting from others’ self-constraint I am free riding. But as most discussions of free riding recognize, refusing to help produce a public good is only unfair when the benefit you receive exceeds the cost you are being asked to pay.[[20]](#endnote-21) A scheme of collective prudence from which no contributor gains a net benefit ought not to be supported at all; if some do while others do not, the contributory demand on the latter is unfair. And while working out the benefit that a rich-world individual receives from others’ self-constraint would be complicated,[[21]](#endnote-22) it is hard to believe that high-emitting individuals, cushioned as they are from the worst effects of climate change, are actually receiving a benefit through others’ voluntary self-constraint which is greater than the cost of imposing that constraint on themselves.

Consider argument (3) next. This faces a different problem. It is true that the group of people leading carbon-neutral lives can correctly say, “We do not leave the world in worse shape than we found it.” It is others who mistreat those who will inherit a degraded world: this group does not. But this does not ground a positive participatory derivation. There may be reasons for me not to produce emissions that carry an expectation of harm (as discussed in Section III); and there may be reasons for me not to join in collective actions of harming (to be discussed in Section V); but the complaint to make against me is not that I am unfairly leaving the burden of not mistreating future generations to others. Compare: in a society pervaded by racism, the complaint against racists is that they are mistreating people; it is not that they are unfairly leaving the burden of not mistreating people to non-racists.

Argument (4) makes an important point. The absence of effective global action prompts the question what we are willing to do to secure it. However, it is fanciful to think that simply reducing energy consumption itself sends an effective political signal. Joining a political lobbying movement can be a way of participating in sending such signals; simply turning the lights off is not. Governments do not treat patterns of energy usage as an indicator of people’s opinions concerning climate action. Having said this, persuasive advocacy does often involve modelling the behaviour you are trying to encourage others to adopt. That provides a rationale for some advocacy groups to require carbon-neutrality of their members. So if it is *those* advocacy groups you ought to join, then a positive participatory derivation will generate a requirement of fairness on you to bear the same burden as other members. However, a compelling argument of this form would require that the most effective kind of advocacy group, and therefore the one I ought to join, makes this requirement of its members. And that seems difficult to establish.

The most serious of these arguments is (2). This maintains that the collective action of self-constrainers makes others (vulnerable people who are not members of that group) significantly better off than they would otherwise be. It asserts a moral requirement of beneficence – a requirement of the kind that is generated when someone can be greatly benefited at small cost to the beneficiary. It is true that “greatly benefited” and “small cost” are both scalar and vague. So requirements of beneficence come in degrees, and admit of indeterminacies. But there are clear cases: preventing someone’s death by giving up money that you will not miss is morally required. This remains so when the benefactor is a group. If, by acting together, we can prevent someone’s death by each giving up money we will not miss, then that can be morally required. But moderating global warming will prevent the deaths of vulnerable people, and the cost of offsetting to achieve carbon-neutrality is money a rich-world individual will not miss. So the collective action is morally required, and if so, the earlier disjunctive complaint can be made against someone who fails to join in. Either you think preventing people’s deaths does not matter, or you are unfairly leaving the work of doing that to others.

To evaluate this argument, we need to appreciate its relationship to the non-participatory argument of Section III. That concerned the expected value of my individual action. This one concerns the expected value of our collective action. This is greater, because there are more of us. The argument then seeks to derive a requirement on me to join in which is independent of the expected value of my doing so: it is a requirement of fairness. To appreciate the structure of the argument, consider its application to another example. A large group is cooperating to free a trapped person by passing rubble down a very long human chain. If I refuse to join in, the complaint against me is not that it makes a significant difference to anyone: it is that it is unfair. The difference *we* make is why we ought to act; we are only doing so through the willingness of each individual to contribute despite making no difference; in being unwilling to cooperate on the same terms, I am being unfair.

Notice also that when we cooperate in this way, the costs each participant can reasonably be required to bear do not seem to be diluted by the size of the group. If someone is drowning and I am the only swimmer, then plausibly I should swim to the limit of my safe capacity to help him – I am not required to go beyond that. But if twenty of us could cooperate by swimming in relays, *each* of us should be willing to swim to the limit of his safe capacity. It is not as though, given the maximum I could be required to do on my own, I can divide that by twenty to generate the maximum I can be required to do when there are twenty of us.

This makes an argument of this form more powerful than the non-participatory one in Section III. Now the expected value we need to calculate is that of our collective action, whose effects are much more significant than those of my individual action. But the cost I can be required to bear in cooperating with others seems as great as it would be if I were acting alone. However, sustaining this argument still requires making the same three-way comparison we struggled with earlier, only this time applied to the group – a comparison between the expected value of the action, the cost (to each member) of performing it, and the centrality or remoteness of its causal contribution. And although the case for thinking that the group stands under a moral requirement is stronger than it was for an individual, I am still unable to demonstrate that it succeeds. This is the strongest argument we have considered so far, but I do not know how to show that it is successful.

**V: Joining in What We Should Not be Doing**

Although the argument just discussed needs to be taken seriously, it invites an accusation of moral complacency. Our relationship to future generations is not one of potential benefactors who should band together to bestow a *benefit* on them: rather, we areactively *harming* them, and I am participating in the collective harm.[[22]](#endnote-23) This thought is emphasized in a participatory derivation of the second, negative, type.

I introduced this with the example of guarding the door for the gang. When I do that, I might make no difference to how much harm the gang inflicts on its victim. Why can I not infer that I have done nothing morally wrong? The answer is that in agreeing to guard the door, I participate in the collective action of the gang. The gang’s action is wrong: it violates both the welfare and the human dignity of its victim. It is by joining in that action that my own conduct is wrong. Just as the victim can ask the gangster who struck the blows, “Why did you assault me?” he can ask me, “Why did you join the assault on me?” My having no adequate reply is what it is for my action to be wrong.

It is important to the force of this explanation that my participation amounts to more than just being a mereological part of what the gang does. Had the gangsters rigged my phone to a distant bomb, then in using the phone my action would be part of their attack. But I would not be directing myself towards the end of harming the victim, in the way that I do in agreeing to guard the door. When the gang members cooperate with each other to perform a collective action – an action of which the gang collectively is the agent – what makes that true is the interlocking structure of intentions and reasoning through which the members combine their agency.[[23]](#endnote-24) The practical thought and activity of each member is responsive to that of the others, disposing them to make mutual adjustments of their individual contributions towards the group’s achievement of its ends. In agreeing to guard the door, I contribute my own intentions to that structure. I am now disposed to shout a warning if I see the police, loudly enough to ensure that the others hear, in enough time to let them escape, to react if I am told to guard a different door, and so on. These dispositions may remain unactivated, but even if they do, they constitute a way in which my agency is structured towards supporting the end of the gang – the same end to which the other members’ agency is structured, in a mutually responsive way. That end is the harm to the victim. This is why, when the victim’s question is put to me – “Why did you join in the assault?” – it is insufficient to reply that my joining in did not itself make a difference. My agency was structured towards the gang’s end, of harming him.[[24]](#endnote-25) That is an end there are powerful other-regarding reasons not to adopt. Lacking an adequate justification for that is what it is for my joining in to be wrong.

But if all negative participatory derivations must follow this form, then its application to climate change is problematic. The gang is an instance of *collusion*; anthropogenic climate change is not.There is no grand global agent coordinating its actions towards the deliberate end of worsening the climate. My own dispositions of thought and action are not structured, in combination with others’, towards the production of that outcome. It is true that my own energy-consuming activities are a mereological part of our collective greenhouse gas emissions. But that does not mean I am participating in wrongdoing in the fuller sense just described – directing my own agency, through the coordination of my dispositions to act and reason about action, towards an immoral end which is the focus for interlocking contributions to the sharing of agency.

So my contributions to climate change are not wrong in that collusive way. But now we must broaden our view. Not all negative participatory derivations – those in which my action is wrong because it is a way of joining in what we should not collectively be doing – have the same collusive structure. There are other clear cases – for example, cases of collective negligence or recklessness. Suppose a group of us runs a business that discharges toxic waste into the water supply, and people are poisoned as a result. Our action need not be intentionally coordinated towards the end of poisoning people in order to be wrong. An action – collective or individual – can be wrong not because of what it aims at but what it fails to aim at. Collective action can be negligent or reckless; and when it is, the derivation of the wrongness of acts of individual participation in the collective wrongdoing is just as plausible as before. The individual business partners are structuring their own actions towards being part of the collective action. The reasons that make the collective action wrong are reasons for the individuals not to structure their actions towards it.

This might then seem to give us the model for a negative participatory derivation that applies to climate-affecting energy consumption. It is wrong for us collectively to pursue a course that negligently produces harmful climate change. Given this, my participating in this collective negligence, by myself indulging in the polluting activities that constitute it, is also wrong.

However, this application is flawed too. The complaint against negligent agents is that they direct their agency in a way that fails to take adequate account of its potentially harmful effects. But such a complaint requires that there is a negligent agent to whose actions it applies. There can be a failure to direct agency as one should only where there is agency. But that is what is absent in the case of global climate-impairing behaviour. There is no global agent directing its agency in an intentionally structured way – no candidate object of criticism for failing to direct that agency in a way that takes proper account of its potential effects. So I am not participating in a negligent collective action.

From this, we cannot conclude that whenever a group does not constitute a collective agent it is morally innocent. Return to the case of the lifeboat. If the eight bystanders fail to communicate with each other and consequently fail to launch the boat, we have not performed a negligent collective action. We have performed no collective action, because we have not banded together to form a collective agent: we are just a random collection of individuals. But it is not as though that is morally unproblematic.[[25]](#endnote-26) On the contrary, we ought to have constituted a collective agent, and our failure to do that is a moral failure. Moreover, if I could have done something to promote our cooperation and failed to do that, I have acted wrongly.

Thus, no objection has been raised against seeing *that* as our moral predicament with respect to climate change. I face the question what I can do to promote cooperation on the scale required to address the problem. But that does not vindicate a participatory derivation. It derives a reason for me to act from the effects I can have on whether a group will act, not from the participatory relation I either bear or fail to bear to the actions of a group.

So: does that mean that negative participatory derivations require the existence of collective agents? No.[[26]](#endnote-27) Suppose a mob is rioting in the centre of town, and I go there to join it. I do not myself break anything or harm anyone; I just run around and share the excitement while others do that. The mob might not constitute a collective agent: it might be just a crowd of individuals with no leadership and none of the coordination through which we can attribute intentions or deliberation to a group. That does not exonerate me. There is still a question I have to face, namely: “Why did you join in?” Even though there was no coordinated group agency, there was still something the crowd did. I have aligned myself with its destructive actions, oriented myself towards its violent behaviour. That is something I can be challenged to account for – as I could, for that matter, if I had merely seen the rioters from my window and cheered them on.

So here there is no collective agent, but the wrongness of my action still derives from the participatory relation I bear to what is done by the group. Why not take *this* as a model for the moral relationship individuals bear towards the large-scale phenomenon of climate change? The answer is that I fail to bear the orientational relationship to the larger group that is present in the example of the rioting crowd. If I were just inadvertently caught up in a riot happening around me, there would be no moral challenge to address. The challenge is: “Why did you join in, aligning yourself in favour of the destruction?” The relation I bear to the uncoordinated actions through which climate change is occurring is not one of positive alignment; there is no joining in.

In examining negative participatory derivations, we began with cases of collusion towards a bad end. We then considered two further kinds of case, which meet weaker conditions. First, there are cases of collective negligence, which are not directed towards a bad end. Secondly, there are cases of joining in the bad action of a random collection of individuals, where there is no collective agent. I claimed that the moral objection in the first kind of case requires a misdirection of collective agency, and that in the second it requires a positive orientation towards a bad object. But neither of those things is present in the case of climate change.

That leaves us with the question whether there are further negative participatory derivations, meeting conditions that are weaker still – where there is neither a collective agent nor a positive orientation. Is it enough to make my action wrong simply that a collection of individuals together cause significant harm by performing an action of a certain type, I know this, and I knowingly perform an action of that type?[[27]](#endnote-28) I think the onus is on someone who thinks that to explain why, and I cannot see what the explanation is. Sometimes, actions meeting that description are wrong; but when they are, the explanation comes from elsewhere. To give a single example: individual actions of littering are wrong, even though they involve neither participation in collective harmful agency nor a positive orientation towards a bad object. But we can explain their wrongness through a positive participatory derivation. An established social expectation of non-littering is sustained by many people; it produces the good of a less littered environment; so I ought to play my part in upholding it. Without that social expectation, that explanation would fail, and I cannot see how to supply a convincing alternative.

**VI: International Applications**

Our focus has been on looking for a participatory derivation of the wrongness of individual contributions to climate change. The discussion has an application to nations as well as to individual agents: I consider this briefly before closing.

Nation-states are agents. They do things, and what they do is determined by decision-making processes that involve deliberation about the reasons for and against the alternatives open to them. No doubt, the existence of national action, decision and deliberation reduces to facts about the individuals and institutions by which nations are metaphysically constituted. But that should not make us doubt that nations perform actions: the structural features that make you and me into reason-responsive agents are equally present at the level of nation-states.

So-called “political realists” deny that national actions are candidates for moral assessment. The argument against that view is straightforward: since nations perform actions which are capable of responsiveness to reasons, it is intelligible to ask whether those actions take adequate account of the other-regarding reasons that bear upon them – whether they are morally right or wrong. Here, I simply register my view that the realists’ counterarguments are unconvincing.[[28]](#endnote-29) If so, the question arises: is there a participatory derivation of either of our two types that establishes a moral requirement on nations to take action on climate change?

With respect to negative participatory derivations, the answer again is No. Since there is no global collective agent that is either deliberately causing climate change or negligently producing it as the effect of some other collective action, nations are not participatory contributors to wrongful action of that kind. Here, their position is comparable to that of individuals.

However, with respect to a positive derivation, the position of nations is different. For while there may be no global collective action of the kind that is needed to regulate the world economy to contain carbon emissions, there is international action that is coordinated towards achieving such regulation. So individual nations ought at least to join in that larger collective action: leaving the work to others is unfair. Having said this, the most that can be derived from an argument of this kind is a requirement that one nation contributes its share of the effort that is actually being made internationally, not that it takes the lead by going further.

There is a requirement of leadership, but it has a non-participatory source. Participatory derivations are those in which moral requirements on agents derive from their actual or potential participation in a larger group, independently of the further effects of their own action or inaction. But the actions of nations do have significant further effects which bear on their moral assessment. A nation’s actions are much likelier than those of an individual to affect what many others will do. Given this, there is a strong case for a moral requirement to exercise that influence positively.

**VII: Conclusion**

I conclude that a participatory derivation of moral requirements on individuals in relation to climate change, either positive or negative, is difficult to sustain; and that when we consider its application to nations, it is limited. So the possibility noted at the outset remains open: perhaps our relation to climate change is indeed one of the cases where a group acts wrongly although no individual member does so.

In some ways that would be a disappointing conclusion to reach, since if it is true that may make it harder for us to motivate ourselves to address this problem properly. I have not quite reached it: I have not found a compelling argument that individual inaction is wrong; but there may be a better argument I have overlooked. However, I close with this thought. The question I have been discussing itself provokes a question. How important is it to establish whether an action is morally required – whether not performing it would be wrong? I have done nothing to cast doubt on the existence of good reasons to moderate one’s own carbon emissions, as an expression of concern for what is happening to the world. After all, it would be bad enough to deserve the disdain of future generations for having worsened the world we leave them, whether or not we also deserve their blame for having wronged them.[[29]](#endnote-30)

Word count

text 7,472

notes 1,205

total 8,677

**Notes**

1. On the “non-identity problem” for this claim, see note [22]. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. For further discussion, see Holly Lawford-Smith, “The Feasibility of Collectives’ Actions”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90 (2012), pp.453-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ‘“It’s Not *My* Fault”: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations’. *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics,* *Ethics.* Ed. W. Sinnott-Armstrong and R. B. Howarth. Advances in the Economics of Environmental Resources. 5 (2005), pp.285-307; Baylor Johnson, “Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons”, *Environmental Values* 12 (2003), pp.271-87. Compare David Killoren and Bekka Williams, “Group Agency and Overdetermination”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (2013), pp.295-307; Joaquim Sandberg, “My Emissions Make No Difference: Climate Change and the Argument from Inconsequentialism”, *Environmental Ethics* 33 (2011), pp.229-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Robin Attfield, “Mediated Responsibilities, Global Warming, and the Scope of Ethics”, *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40 (2009), pp.225-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. For further discussion, and a survey of relevant literature, see my “Moral Free Riding”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (1995), pp.3-34, and “Public Goods and Fairness”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86 (2008), pp.1-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Arguing that we ought not to be digging the well would be the start of a case for the conclusion that I am not acting wrongly, but not the end of it. If the community has fair and inclusive procedures for collective decision-making, then I could be morally required to respect the decisions it has reached, despite disagreeing with them. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. I am not claiming that if the gang acts wrongly and I am part of the gang, then that is sufficient to make my action of joining the gang morally wrong. If I guard the door under duress, I am part of the gang, but the duress involved in making me join may have an excusing force. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. This is a standard reading of W.D. Ross’s view of wrongness: see for example Philip Stratton-Lake, “Introduction” to W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp.ix-lviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. See e.g. Gary Watson, *Agency and Answerability* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), esp. Ch.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. T.M. Scanlon’s view, in *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), Ch.5, belongs to this type. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. See e.g. Stephen L. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), esp. Ch.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. For clear expositions of this line of reply, see Christopher Morgan-Knapp and Charles Goodman, “Consequentialism, Climate Harm and Individual Obligations”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2014); and John Broome, “The Public and Private Morality of Climate Change”, Tanner Lecture delivered at the University of Michigan, 16 March 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. See the IPPC report, *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, available at ipcc-wg2.gov/. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Broome, “The Public and Private Morality of Climate Change”, at note 3; John Nolt, “How Harmful Are the Average American’s Greenhouse Gas Emissions?”, *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 14 (2011), pp.3-10, at p.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. As the authors cited in note [14] both do. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. This correlation is found in those with aggressive predispositions. See Sheldon Cohen and Shirlynn Spacapan, “The Social Psychology of Noise”, in D.M. Jones and A.J. Chapman (eds), *Noise and Society* (Chichester: John Wiley, 1984), pp.221-45, at 227-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Source: www.climatefriendly.com/. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. You do not thereby eradicate the expectation of harm associated with your emitting actions; but the expectation of harm associated with your emitting and offsetting actions taken together is zero. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Nor does it seem that all cases in which free riding is unfair follow this derivational form. If I help myself to the goods produced by a gang’s protection racket without contributing to the efforts of the gang, that might treat the other gangsters unfairly. But it would not be because I ought to be joining in those efforts. For that to be true, it would need to be the case that the gang ought to be imposing its protection racket, which is false. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. See e.g. Richard J. Arneson, "The Principle of Fairness and Free-Rider Problems", *Ethics* 92 (1982), p.623. Complexities arise here concerning the bundling of public goods. It can apparently be reasonable to require me to pay for some bundles of goods even though not every good in the bundle is beneficial to me. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. This would require a three-step calculation. The first step would be to assess how much the carbon-neutral group would have emitted had they not imposed this constraint on themselves. For this, one would need data about people’s incomes, their emissions, and whether they report that they are constraining those emissions out of concern for climate change or not. One could then estimate the amount by which (reported) self-constraint reduces emissions, on average, in people on a given income. Given that estimate, the second step would be to determine the difference their self-constraint makes to global temperatures. The third would be to correlate that temperature difference with premature deaths and other effects on people’s welfare. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. There is a *de dicto* reading of that claim on which it is unaffected by the “non-identity problem” – the point that our actions make a difference to which future individuals exist. Our actions do not cause the same individuals to be worse off; they cause one set of future individuals to be worse off than another set would have been. To most of us, *that* seems to be enough to be able to make current actions wrong because of their future effects. For discussion, see Caspar Hare, “Voices from Another World: Must We Respect the Interests of People Who Do Not, and Will Never, Exist?”, *Ethics* 117 (2007), pp.498-523. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. See [Michael E. Bratman](http://ww2.cs.mu.oz.au/481/biblio/Author/BRATMAN-M.html), “Shared Cooperative Activity”, *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992), pp.327-340; Margaret Gilbert, *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality, and Obligation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. My agency can be structured towards supporting this end of our collective action, even if it is not an end of my own. In guarding the door, my end need only be to earn some money – it need not matter to me whether the victim gets harmed. But in agreeing to act as I do, my agency is still structured towards supporting the attainment of that end by the group. My structuring my agency in this way, interdependently with the other gang members, forms part of the overall coordination of the group towards its aim. This is what makes it true that I am participating in the gang’s attack, and makes me accountable to its victim. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Virginia Held, “Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible?”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970), pp.471-81. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Nor do positive ones. The collection of theatre patrons do not have to constitute a collective agent in order for me to be unfairly free riding when I sneak in without paying. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Compare Parfit’s principle (C12), *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.81, which is invoked by Attfield, “Mediated Responsibilities, Global Warming, and the Scope of Ethics”, pp.228-9. But is Parfit’s principle correct? If his “Harmless Torturers” (p.80) are *colluding*, then each acts wrongly in the same way as someone who joins the gang. But what if they are not? [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. I discuss this issue further in “The Moral, the Personal, and the Political”, in Igor Primoratz (ed.), *Politics and Morality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.54-75. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. This paper has benefited greatly from the written comments of Aaron Maltais, Matthew Rendall, Anne Schwenkenbecher and Dan Weijers, and from audiences at Adelaide, ANU, McGill, Melbourne and Wellington. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)