**A Deontological Approach to Future Consequences**

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**Forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Intergenerational Ethics,* edited by Stephen Gardiner**

**Abstract:** This chapter defends a deontological approach to both the non-identity problem and what is referred to as the “inconsequentiality problem.” Both problems arise in cases where, although the actions of presently living people appear to have harmful consequences for future people, it is difficult to explain why there are moral reasons against such actions. The deontological response to both problems appeals to a distinction between causal and non-causal consequences. By acknowledging the moral importance of such a distinction, deontologists can vindicate the judgment that, collectively and individually, we have harm-based reasons against bringing about bad consequences for future people.

**Key Words:** deontological approach, non-identity problem, inconsequentiality problem, harm-based reasons, causal consequences, non-causal consequences

**Introduction**

Consider the following thought experiment:

*Technology***.** We have developed a new and useful technology, one which will have profound consequences for people’s career choices and procreative decisions. The new technology will be completely safe for presently living people as well as for the next few generations, and it will neither exacerbate nor ameliorate climate change. However, the technology produces a chemical byproduct that we can safely store underground for only two hundred years. After that time, the chemical will leach into the environment, causing cancer in many people whose very existence will be a consequence of our using the technology, and who will be residing within a large radius of our storage facility.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now call a reason that is grounded in a *prima facie* duty to refrain from harming future people a “future-person-directed, harm-based reason.” In Technology, is there a future-person-directed, harm-based reason for us to refrain from using the technology?

Intuitively, the answer is yes: let us call this the “reason intuition.” Nevertheless, attempts to justify the reason intuition have faced a multitude of objections, ranging from skepticism about the existence of future people to skepticism about whether we can have reasons directed towards other people at all.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this chapter, I want to focus on—and ultimately diffuse—two such objections. The first, which arises from what is known as the “non-identity problem,” [[3]](#footnote-3) holds that in cases like Technology, the very existence of the future people with cancer will be contingent upon our use of the technology. That is, the people who will exist if we use the technology will be *non-identical* to the people who would have existed if we had not used the technology. Assuming that the people who will exist will also have lives worth living, these future people might prefer a world in which we used the technology—and they existed, and they got cancer—to a world in which they never existed at all. The second objection, which arises from what I will call the “inconsequentiality problem,”[[4]](#footnote-4) is that our using the technology is a collective action, and each presently living person’s contribution to that action is so small that there can be no harm-based reason against it.

Both objections share a common assumption about what it takes for there to be a person-directed, harm-based reason against an action or omission. That assumption, which I will refer to as the “consequence criterion,” can be formulated as follows:

For any person, X, there is an X-directed, harm-based reason against an action or omission only if the consequences for X of the action or omission are worse than the consequences would have been for X in the absence of that action or omission.

The problem with this assumption is that *not all consequences matter in the same way*. More precisely, there is a difference between the *causal consequences* of an action (or omission) and *non*-*causal consequences* of an action (or omission)*,* and our future-person-directed, harm-based reasons are determined only by *causal consequences*. In this chapter, I will argue that this distinction between types of consequences helps vindicate the reason intuition because it helps to justify a harm-based solution to both the non-identity problem and the inconsequentiality problem. I will explain both problems in more detail, and I will show how a view that distinguishes between causal and non-causal consequences can help to solve each problem, in turn. In the final section, I will highlight some further attractions of the view.

**1. The Non-Identity Problem**

Recall that in Technology, our decision to use the technology today will have the consequence that two hundred years from now, many people will get cancer. I mentioned that according to the reason intuition, we have a future-person-directed, harm-based reason to refrain from using the technology. However, this intuition is threatened by an argument that arises from the *non*-*identity* *problem*, which is the theoretical problem of either justifying or debunking the intuition that an individual can ever be wronged by an action or omission that is the condition of his or her own worthwhile existence.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Here is how the objection arises in the case of Technology. First, notice that the very existence of each future person will likely be contingent upon whether we use the technology. That is because, if we use the technology, presently living people will spend their time differently. As a result, they will meet different romantic partners, and they will procreate at different times. These consequences will have cascading effects, so that in two hundred years, no one whose cancer is caused by the technology would have existed, had we never used the technology in the first place.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Now consider whether a life that includes a battle with cancer is still worth living. Many people would hold that it is: cancer is a great harm, and sometimes it leads to an early death. However, even the consideration that you will die early from cancer does not appear to be reason enough to wish that you had never been born.

This means that our use of the technology has two significant consequences for the people of the future. One of these consequences is that they exist at all, with lives worth living. The other consequence is that they get cancer. In making the judgment that the lives of the future people are on the whole worth living, we have already implicitly weighed these consequences against each other: we have already determined that having a life worth living matters more in absolute terms than getting cancer. It might appear, then, that our use of the technology will confer, if anything, a *net benefit* upon future people, rather than a net harm. Our action will subject future people to both a good consequence and a bad consequence, but the good consequence is greater in magnitude than the bad one.

That is the reasoning that leads to the conclusion that the reason intuition cannot be justified. I will refer to such reasoning as the “non-identity argument.” However, I believe that the non-identity argument is mistaken, and that the reason intuition can, in fact, be justified. To see where the non-identity argument goes wrong, consider two counterfactuals that the future people might assert, given their perspective on how things turned out for them:

1. If the people of the 21st century hadn’t used the technology, we would not have had lives worth living (because we wouldn’t have had lives at all).
2. If the people of the 21st century hadn’t used the technology, we would not have gotten cancer.

Both of these counterfactuals are true when the future people utter them, and they justify our holding that these future people’s worthwhile lives and their cancer are consequences of our using the technology.

But although both the worthwhile lives and the cancer are consequences of our using the technology, I maintain that only one is what I am calling a “*causal* consequence”of using the technology. As I will explain in more detail below, the future people’s cancer is a “causal consequence” of our using the technology, but their worthwhile lives are what I am calling a “non-causal consequence” of our using the technology. According to a view I will refer to as the “causal view,” this distinction between causal and non-causal consequences matters morally. It means that in using the technology, we harm the future people, but we do not benefit them. It also means that the harm we do to future people when we cause them to get cancer is not justified by the benefit of their having worthwhile lives, *even* *though* the benefit of a worthwhile life is greater than the harm of cancer. This is so because the causal view also includes the following principle, which I will call the “justification criterion”:

A harmful action or omission that causes greater benefits can sometimes be justified by those benefits, but a harmful action or omission cannot be justified by any consequent benefits that the action or omission, itself, does not cause.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Let me explain the various components of the causal view in more detail. The first and most important component of the view, as I have already noted, is the distinction between causal and non-causal consequences. In an earlier paper, I showed how certain substantive accounts of that distinction can help us apply the causal view to specific cases.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, it does not matter a greatdeal *which* substantive theory of causation is annexed to the causal view. The causal view requires only that, according to whichever theory of causation we endorse, there be *some* principle that distinguishes between the relation our action bears to the future people’s cancer and the relation our action bears to the future people’s existence.[[9]](#footnote-9) Therefore, rather than defend in this chapter a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for causation, I will merely appeal to some standard examples that might make the distinction between causal and non-causal consequences intuitivelyclearer.[[10]](#footnote-10)

First, when I strike a match under ordinary circumstances, the flame is caused by *the striking of the match* andnot by the *presence of oxygen in the room.* It’s true that if there had been no oxygen in the room, the match would not have caught fire. However, the presence of oxygen is a *mere condition* of the flame, whereas the striking of the match is the *cause*.[[11]](#footnote-11) In this case, then, the flame is a *causal* consequenceof my striking the match, and it is a non-causal consequence of oxygen’s presence in the room.

Here is another example that involves omissions instead of actions. Suppose that I agreed to water your plants while you were away, but then I failed to water them, and they died. My omission is a *cause* of their death. It’s true that if the Queen of England had watered them, then they would not have died. However, her failure to water them is a *mere condition* of their death.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this case, then, their death is a *causal consequence* of my omission, whereas it is a non-causal consequence of the Queen’s omission.

The next component of the causal view is a causal theory of harming and benefiting.[[13]](#footnote-13) It holds that harming someone is causing a harm for him or her, and that benefiting someone is causing a benefit for him or her. A harm for you is a state of affairs such that, were you to have existed without it, you would have been better off in at least some respect. For example, the state of affairs in which Jones has cancer is a harm for Jones. If he had existed without the cancer, he would have been better off in many respects. Likewise, a benefit for you is a state of affairs such that, were you to have existed without it, you would have been *worse* off in at least some respect. For example, the state of affairs in which you have a worthwhile life is a benefit for you, for if you were to have existed *without* having a worthwhile life, you would have been worse off in many respects.

I argued in an earlier paper that when you procreateand thereby bring into existence a daughter or a son who has a life worth living, you benefit your child: having a worthwhile life is a benefit, and procreating (under ordinary circumstances) is a way to cause someone to experience that benefit.[[14]](#footnote-14) Nevertheless, it is also possible for your act of procreating to harm your child. For example, if you procreate while you have a temporary medical condition that causes your child to be born in poor health, you thereby cause the state of affairs in which your child suffers from poor health. Harm-based reasons, which are grounded in a duty of non-maleficence, are generally stronger than *benefit-based reasons,* or reasons that are grounded in a duty of beneficence. In other words, there is stronger reason against causing someone a particular degree of harm than there is in favor of causing someone the same degree, or even a somewhat larger degree, of benefit. Therefore, if your act of procreating inflicts a significant amount of harm on your child, then the balance of reasons might tell against that action, even if your child’s life would be worth living.

Now compare the act of procreating while you have a temporary medical condition to our act of using the technology described in Technology. Our act of using the technology is even *less* likely to be favored by the balance of reasons than your act of procreating. In the procreation case, there was a child-directed, harm-based reason against your action *and* a child-directed, benefit-based reason in favor of it. In Technology, there is a future-person-directed, harm-based reason against using the technology, but *there is no* future-person-directed, benefit-based reason in favor of it. That is because in Technology, our action of using the technology does not cause the future people to exist (and have worthwhile lives) the way that procreating causes your child to exist (and have a worthwhile life). Counterfactual dependence of the kind elucidated in claims (1) and (2) above is not sufficient for causation. Using the technology is a condition of each future person’s having a life worth living, but it is not a cause.

Recall the consequence criterion that I mentioned in the introduction:

For any person, X, there is an X-directed, harm-based reason against an action or omission only if the consequences for X of the action or omission are worse than the consequences would have been for X in the absence of that action or omission.

According to the causal view, the consequence criterion is false. In its place, we should accept the following sufficient condition for a person-directed, harm-based reason, which we can call the “causal criterion”:

For any person, X, there is an X-directed, harm-based reason against an action or omission if at least one of the causal consequences of that action or omission is a harm for X.

My argument for rejecting the consequence criterion and accepting the causal criterion in its place is an abductive one. The causal view, which endorses the causal criterion, a causal account of harming and benefiting, and the principle I referred to above as the “justification criterion,” provides the best explanation for our judgments about both the non-identity problem and, as I will soon argue, the inconsequentiality problem.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Here is a recap of what the causal view implies about Technology. First, the causal criterion is satisfied in Technology, for cancer is a harm for the future people, and at least one of the causal consequences of our using the technology is that they have cancer. Second, the existence of these future people is *not* a causal consequence of our using the technology, so the consideration that they have worthwhile lives is not a benefit-based reason in favor of our using the technology. Third, their worthwhile lives do not attenuate the force of the harm-based reason in any other way, for according to the justification criterion, a harmful action or omission cannot be justified by any consequent benefits that the action or omission, itself, does not cause. Therefore, the causal view implies that is there a future-person-directed, harm-based reason against our using the technology, and it does not imply that there are any future-person-directed, benefit-based reasons that could attenuate the force of the harm-based reason.

**2. The Inconsequentiality Problem**

I have so far argued that rejecting the consequence criterion and accepting the causal view in its place can help justify the reason intuition and thereby solve the non-identity problem. In this section, I will argue that the causal view can also solve what I call the “inconsequentiality problem,” which is the problem of either justifying or debunking the intuition that each individual has a harm-based reason against contributing to a collective harm.

To see how the inconsequentiality problem arises, let us fill in a few more details about the case we started with.

*Technology 2.* We have developed a new and beneficial technology. If fewer than 25,000 people use the technology, no harm will come to anyone, present or future. However, if between 25,000 and 50,000 presently living people use the technology, their use of the technology will cause exactly 1,000 future people to get cancer. If between 50,000 and 75,000 presently living people use the technology, then their use of the technology will cause exactly 2,000 future people to get cancer, and so on. As it turns out, whether you use the technology or not, 36,703 other people will use it.

In the previous section I argued that *we*, as a community, have a weighty future-person-directed, harm-based reason *not* to use the technology. But now I will ask a slightly different question: Do you, as an *individual*, have a future-person-directed, harm-based reason to refrain from using the technology?

It might be tempting to think about the case in the following way. If you use the technology, 1,000 future people will get cancer. If you *do not* use the technology, 1,000 future people will still get cancer. Therefore, *your use* of the technology does not make a difference for future people. Each of the 1,000 future people will get cancer whether you use it or not. Therefore, there is no way to justify the intuition that youhave a future-person-directed, harm-based reason to refrain from using the technology.

I will refer to such reasoning as the “inconsequentiality argument.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The problem with the inconsequentiality argument is that, like the non-identity argument, it appeals to the consequence criterion for harm-based reasons. We should therefore reject the inconsequentiality argument.

Interestingly, an appeal to the consequence criterion produces one kind of error in a collective context and a different kind of error in an individual context. In the collective context, as we saw in the previous section, the consequence criterion gives our community toomuch“credit*,*”so to speak,for using the technology. In other words, the non-identity argument holds us responsible, not only for the future people’s cancer, but also for each future person’s very existence. In the individual context, on the other hand, the consequence criterion does not give us enough“credit.” In Technology 2, for example, it seems as though there is at least one future-person-directed, harm-based reason for you to refrain from using the technology, but the consequence criterion implies that there are none.

Of course, some people might resist the claim that a moral theory *should imply* that there is a harm-based reason for you to refrain from using the technology. They might argue that framing the problem in terms of individual reasons is, in fact, a tactical mistake: if we frame the problem that way, we will be fooled into thinking that we can find a practical solution to various collective action problems at the individual level, when effective solutions can only be found at the political level.

However, I disagree that assigning individual responsibility in collective action cases is a tactical mistake. It is possible to hold, both that each individual makes a *tiny* causal contribution to a harm *and* that collective action problems should be solved at the political level. Indeed, it is difficult to see what justification there could be for crafting a political solution—such as a set of laws or norms, a new market, or a system of infrastructure—unless we believed that such interventions would better incentivize people to act in accordance with the individual moral reasons they already had.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Therefore, a plausible solution to the inconsequentiality problem should imply that there is *a* reason for you to refrain from using the technology, but it need not imply that this reason is *weighty.* (And it should perhaps also allow for the possibility that if we aggregate your reason with everyone else’s reasons, the sum of these reasons will be roughly as weighty as the reason there is for *us,* as a community, to refrain from using the technology.) Let us next consider whether the causal view can generate the right result.

Recall that the causal criterion for a person-directed, harm-based reason is the following:

For any person, X, there is an X-directed, harm-based reason against an action or omission if at least one of the causal consequences of that action or omission is a harm for X.

In Technology 2, if you use the technology, then the event that consists of your action and the actions of 36,703 other people is what causes the future people’s cancer. It follows straightforwardly that the future people’s cancer is a causal consequence of that event, and so, according to the causal criterion, there is a reason for the 36,704 of you, as a group, to refrain from using the technology.

But is the future people’s cancer a causal consequence of your individual action? I believe that the answer is *yes,* and that this answer follows in part from what I will call the “joint causation principle”:

If an individual action is part of a larger event that causes a harm, then that harm is among the individual action’s causal consequences.

In support of this principle, consider a case in which two assassins stab a victim, and although neither stab wound, on its own, would have killed the victim, the two stab wounds together cause the victim’s death. Intuitively, the death is a causal consequence of the event that consists of the two stabbings, but it is also a causal consequence of *each* of the assassin’s actions.

An opponent might object that there is an important difference between the assassin case and Technology 2. In the assassin case, it took both assassins to kill the victim, but in Technology 2, it would have taken only 25,000 people using the technology to cause the cancer. The extra 11,704 people who used the technology did not make any necessary causal contributions, so it would be wrong to say that the cancer was a causal consequence of the individual actions of these 11,704 additional people.

This objection fails because events that *overdetermine* their effects are still causes. If your action is part of an event that *overdetermines* a harm, then your action is part of an event that *causes* that harm.[[18]](#footnote-18)

To see why events that overdetermine their effects are still causes, consider a case in which Billy throws a rock at a glass bottle, and the glass bottle shatters. Suppose that if the rock had been traveling at a speed of at least 50 miles per hour, the bottle would have shattered. Nevertheless, this particular rock was traveling at a speed of 80 miles per hour. It would be incorrect to claim that only *part* of Billy’s throw was the cause of the shattered bottle. Instead, we hold that the event of *Billy’s throw* caused the bottle to break. His throw overdetermined its effect, but it was still a cause. Likewise, in the case of Technology, the event that consisted of 36,704 people using the technology overdetermined the cancer. Nevertheless, it also caused the cancer.

An opponent might now raise the objection that I have incorrectly individuated the event that caused the cancer. The *true* cause of the cancer was the event that consisted of 25,000 people using the technology. The actions of the 11,074 additional people who *also* used the technology were not partof that event, and so, unlike Billy’s throw, the event that caused the cancer did not overdetermine its effect.

Notice that this objection is motivated by the following criterion for individuating events, which I will refer to as the “individuating-by-consequences criterion”:

For any individual action X, X is part of an event that causes Y only if, had X not been performed, Y would not have happened.

But the individuating-by-consequences criterion should be rejected, for it faces clear counterexamples. Consider a case in which two assassins, Alice and Ben, stab a victim, and although neither stab wound, on its own, would have killed the victim, the two stab wounds together cause the victim’s death. But now suppose that if Ben had not stabbed the victim, a third assassin named Carl, who was standing nearby, would have stabbed the victim, and the wounds inflicted by Alice and Carl would have been sufficient to kill the victim. In this case it is not true that if Ben had not stabbed the victim, the victim would not have died. Nevertheless, Ben’s action is part of an event (the event that consists of Ben’s stab and Alice’s stab) that causes the victim to die. Similarly, then, your action can be part of an event (the event that consists of 36,704 people using the technology) that causes the future people to get cancer even if it is not true that if you hadn’t used the technology, the future people would not have gotten cancer.[[19]](#footnote-19)

I have so far argued that rejecting the consequence criterion and accepting the causal view in its place can help us solve the inconsequentiality problem. Doing so helps us justify the intuition that in Technology 2, there isa reason for you to refrain from using the technology.[[20]](#footnote-20)

I have not yet addressed how the causal view might determine the *strength* of that reason, but the view is compatible with a number of principles for determining a reason’s strength. Indeed, in an earlier paper, I argued for three different strength-determining principles, two of which are relevant in this case.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The first principle has to do with the *degree of harm,* which I define as follows:

The *degree of a harm* is directly proportional to the amount by which an individual’s level of well-being on some dimen­sion would be higher if the individual existed and the state of affairs that is the harm had not obtained (2017, p. 83).

Using that definition, I formulated the “degree of harm principle” as follows:

Other things being equal, the reason against harming is stronger, the greater the degree of a harm (2017, p. 83).

In the case of Technology 2, the degree of harm to each future person is large; cancer is a significant harm because people would be much better off without it. On its own, then, this principle might suggest that your individual reason against using the technology is weighty.

Nevertheless, I have also argued for another principle that draws upon the concept of “redundant harming,” which I define as follows:

An action *redundantly harms* an individual when it causes her to suffer a harm that she would have suffered anyway, had the action not been performed (2017, p. 86).

What I call the “redundant harming principle” says this:

Other things being equal, the reason against redundantly harming an individual is weaker than the reason against non-redundantly harming an individual (2017, p. 86).

The redundant harming principle *weakens* your individual reason against using the technology, for even if you had not used the technology, 1,000 people would still have gotten cancer. The result that your reason is *weaker* in Technology 2 than it might be in a case where you were the *sole* cause of a harm is intuitively correct: your individual reason against using the technology should be weaker than the reason there is for the *community* to refrain from using the technology.

Notice that the redundant harming principle is similar to the consequence criterion. Both principles invoke the consideration that *the harm would have happened anyway* as a way of showing either that *there is no reason against your action* (in the case of the consequence criterion) or that *the reason against your action is weak* (in the case of the redundant harming principle). Indeed, this similarity can be used to “explain away” the initial attraction of the consequence criterion. Perhaps the reason we were drawn to the consequence criterion, in the first place, is that we thought it mattered that the harm would have happened anyway. However, the mistake we made was in thinking that this consideration *eliminated* whatever reason there might have been against the individual action. Instead, this consideration simply *weakened* that reason.

Now consider a variation on Technology 2:

*Technology 3.* We have developed a new and beneficial technology. If fewer than 25,000 people use the technology, no harm will come to anyone, present or future. However, if between 25,000 and 50,000 presently living people use the technology, then their use of the technology will cause exactly 1,000 future people to get cancer. You use the technology, and so do exactly 24,999 other people.

In this case, your act of harming is not a case of redundant harming, so your reason against using the technology is much stronger than it was in Technology 3. This, I believe, is exactly the right result.

**3. Is the causal view plausible?**

I have so far argued for what I have called the “causal view” as a solution to both the non-identity problem and the inconsequentiality problem. The causal view justifies the claim that it is possible for a presently living group of people to harm future people, even if the present generation’s actions determine who exists in the future, and even the people of the future have worthwhile lives. Moreover, the causal view justifies the claim that an *individual* can harm future people even if, had the individual not acted as she did, the harm to future people would still have occurred.

One argument in favor of the causal view is that it has both implications. Nevertheless, we would have good reason to reject the causal view if it had other, less plausible moral implications. In this section, then, I want to consider whether we ought to reject the causal view for that reason. Does it have morally unacceptable implications?

Recall that the causal view draws a distinction between causal and non-causal consequences of an action or omission, and it holds that only the *causal* consequences of that action or omission can generate harm-based or benefit-based reasons against or in favor of it. An opponent of my view might question whether the causal versus non-causal distinction can make this kind of moral difference. If you were deciding what to do, wouldn’t you want to know about *all* the consequences of your action, and not just the causal ones? Why wouldn’t a good moral agent want to do what would have the *best consequences* for people*,* or at least the best consequences for the people she cares about benefiting and harming?

In response, I will present two cases that suggest that, in fact, we *do not* think certain non-causal consequences of our actions generate reasons that support or disfavor those actions. In the first case, you are deciding whether to have a child. You know that if you have a child, the child will one day die. (You know this because *everyone* will one day die.) Indeed, the following counterfactual will one day be true:

If you had not procreated, your daughter or son would not have died.

This means that your son or daughter’s death is a consequence of your act of procreating. Now, is your son or daughter’s death a harm-based reasonagainst procreating? Certainly, you have a strongharm-based reason against, say, stabbing your child to death after he or she has already been born. However, it would be absurd to say that the fact that your son or daughter will die is, in much the same way, a harm-based reason against procreating*.* Stabbing and procreating are extremely differentactions*,* from a moral point of view. That is largely because your child’s death is a *causal consequence* of stabbing and merely a *non-causal consequence* of procreating. This case shows that a future *harm* to your child—even one that is a consequence of one of your actions—does not necessarily generate a reason against that action.

Other cases can show that when your action is a condition but not a cause of future *benefits,* those benefits do not generate reasons in favor of the action. One such case is the case of Technology, as I have already argued. Another such case is the following:

*Nazi Prisoner:* A man was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp for many years, where he suffered immensely and came very close to death. But after he was liberated, he flourished. Being in the camp had paradoxically enabled him to grow stronger, wiser, and more grateful to be alive.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In this case, the man’s strength and wisdom are benefits to him, and these benefits are a *consequence* of the Nazis’ action: if they had not imprisoned the man, he would not have grown so wise. Nevertheless, these benefits did not give the Nazis a benefit-based *reason* to imprison the man. This is because the benefits to the prisoner were not caused by the Nazis; instead, the man’s growth was a causal consequence of his own, inner resilience.

Here is a more general reason, at least for deontologists, to believe that the distinction between causal and non-causal consequences is morally relevant. Many deontologists accept the *Doctrine of Doing and Allowing Harm* (DDA)*,* which can be formulated as the principle that *doing* *harm* requires greater justification than *allowing* *harm*. The DDA might tell us, for example, that in a case where death is an equally great harm to everyone involved, it would be wrong for me to kill one person, even if doing so were the only way to save five other lives, and even if no one besides the six would be affected no matter what I did. Let us call this the “deontological intuition.”

But anyone who accepts the deontological intuition should accept the claim that not all consequences generate harm-based reasons of the same strength. For if each of my five harm-based reasons *in favor* of killing the one were as strong as my single harm-based reason *against* killing the one, the balance of reasons would favor killing the one. Thus, to affirm the result that killing the one is wrong, a proponent of the deontological intuition will have to say that the harms to the five that are a consequence of my failing to kill the one *do not generate reasons* strong enough to override my reason against killing the one.

Now, in principle, a proponent of the deontological intuition could hold that

1. the harms to the five do not generate sufficiently strong reasons to kill the one

without holding that

1. the harms to the five do not generate sufficiently strong reasons to kill the one *because* they are non-causal consequences of my failure to kill the one.

For example, a proponent of the DDA could instead suggest that

1. the harms to the five do not generate sufficiently strong reasons to kill the one *because* they are consequences of an omission, rather than an action.

And indeed, claim (3) could be generalized and advanced as an alternative to both the consequence criterion and the causal criterion. The result, which we can call the “omission criterion,” would say something like this:

For any person, X, there is an X-directed, harm-based reason against an action if at least one of the consequences of that action is a harm for X, but there is possibly no (or only a weak) X-directed, harm-based reason against an omission, even if one of the consequences of that omission is a harm for X.

The omission criterion might appear to be an attractive justification for the deontological intuition. However, the omission criterion has no advantage over the consequence criterion when it comes to cases like Technology; since future people’s worthwhile lives and their cancer are both consequences of an *action* (rather than an omission), the omission criterion is no better than the consequence criterion at justifying the reason intuition.

On the other hand, the causal criterion can justify both the reason intuition *and* the deontological intuition. It can justify the deontological intuition by appealing to the following line of reasoning. First, doing harm is harming, which is the same as *causing a harm for someone.* Allowing harm is *failing to benefit* someone. Because failing to benefit the five is not the same as *causing* the five to die, you do not have five harm-based reasons to save the five. Now, you still have five benefit-based reasons to save the five, for if you saved them, you would *cause* them to live. Nevertheless, as we saw in the case where you procreated while you had a temporary medical condition, there is stronger reason against causing someone a particular degree of harm than there is in favor of causing someone the same degree, or even a somewhat larger degree, of benefit. That is why the balance of reasons may well come out *against* killing the one. (This result does not justify absolutism, however; it may well turn out to be permissible to kill one to save a larger number of people. The threshold will depend upon how we are to aggregate reasons directed towards separate people and upon how *much* stronger the reason against harming is than the reason in favor of benefiting.)

Thus, the causal view appears to be morally plausible. At least, it has morally plausible implications for cases like Technology, Technology 2, and Nazi Prisoner. It also has plausible implications in procreation cases. And those who have the deontological intuition should find plausible the implications of the causal view for cases where we must choose between killing and letting die.

As I noted in section 1, I have not fully explicated the metaphysics of the distinction between causal and non-causal consequences, although I cited some theories that I believe can support the distinction. If those theories of causation turn out to be wrong, my hope is that an alternative theory of causation—one that draws a principled distinction between causal consequences and non-causal consequences—can be found. Such a theory would have much to offer the field of ethics, as I hope this chapter has shown.

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1. I have made this case similar in structure to the risky policy case in Parfit (1987), p. 371 – 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Earl (2011), who argues that if the future is not real, then future generations do not have rights against us. For replies to Earl’s view, see Griffith (2017, 2018) and my (2016). For a discussion of whether our obligations to future generations can be grounded, not in reasons directed towards other people, but in the principles of rational choice, see Gauthier (1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term “non-identity problem” was coined by Parfit (1987) to refer to a puzzle that appears to have been independently discovered by Parfit (1976), Schwartz (1978), and Adams (1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This objection is sometimes referred to as the problem of “causal impotence” or “causal inefficacy” (see, for example, Norcross 2004, 2008; Harris and Galvin 2012; and Garrett 2007). However, as I will argue below, the problem has to do more with the lack of a *non-causal* kind of consequence, rather than causal inefficacy; that is why I am using the term ‘inconsequentiality’ instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I formulate the problem in a similar way in my (2015) paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Parfit illustrates this point by asking us to consider whether we would have been born at all, if railways and motor cars had never been invented (1987, p. 361). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I first defend this principle in my (2019a). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See my (2019a), where I appeal to some principles of causation advanced by Broadbent (2008) and Hart and Honoré (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It is possible that this distinction could also be grounded, not in a theory of causation, but in some other metaphysical theory, much like those theories in which some philosophers have attempted to ground the distinction between doing and allowing harm. For example, Woollard (2015) does not frame her metaphysical account of the doing/allowing distinction as a theory of causation, but I take it to do roughly same workthat I would want a theory of causation to do. (Indeed, I suspect that with a certain amount of translation, Woollard’s metaphysical principles could be annexed to my causal view in order to support the distinctions I am drawing. However, I have not worked out exactly what the final view would look like.) In any case, a theory that supports my view does not *have* to be called a “theory of causation”, the distinction I draw does not *have* to be called a distinction between “causal”’ and “non-causal” consequences, and my view does not *have* to be called the “causal view.” Nevertheless, I find it easier to write about the view using causal language. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Likewise, I will not attempt in this chapter to explain *why* the metaphysical distinction between causal and non-causal consequences has moral significance. My aim here is to simply establish that it *does* matter morally in the ways I have indicated, and that a belief in the moral significance of the distinction appears to cohere with a number of other highly plausible judgments. Note that many people already accept the moral significance of other metaphysical distinctions, such as the distinction between persons and non-persons, the distinction between pleasure and pain, or the distinction between actual and merely possible consequences. It is possible that whatever explains the moral relevance of these other distinctions can also help to explain why the distinction between causal and non-causal consequences matters morally, but I will not fully develop this idea here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Hart and Honore (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. McGrath (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I develop this account more fully in my (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gardner (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A *full* defense of the causal view would explain why other proposed solutions to the non-identity problem—including solutions that are advanced in other chapters of this volume—are not successful. I will not here advance criticisms of these other proposals, but I encourage the reader to consult my (2019b) paper for a critique of David Boonin’s (2014) proposal. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For a helpful survey of how this argument has been developed and challenged in relation to our individual contributions to climate change, see Fragnière (2016). Many philosophers have also discussed some version of the inconsequentiality argument in relation to other issues, such as ethical vegetarianism, ethical consumerism, and voting; see, for example, Norcross (2004, 2008); Garrett (2007); Harris and Galvin (2012); Almassi (2011); and Goldman (1999). Kagan (2011) and Nefsky (2012) frame the argument as a more general problem for consequentialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I take Stephen Gardiner to be making a similar point when he argues, “[I]t is not clear that a more demanding account of individual responsibility is so implausible, either at the level of the usual or more foundationally. In fact, it seems that demanding ideals may already be there, lucking in background conceptions of how political responsibility is supposed to work” (2017a, p. 38). See also his (2017b), in which Gardiner appeals to the view that “political institutions gain legitimacy from the prior responsibilities of individual citizens, who delegate their various individual and collective responsibilities … to those institutions. … On this delegated responsibility model, institutions that fail to discharge the responsibilities delegated to them lose legitimacy, and responsibility falls back on the citizens to see that they are discharged in some other way …. This explanation appears to fit the history of the climate case …” (p. 451). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Note that I am assuming that small events (including actions) can be parts of larger events, and that in virtue of being parts of these larger events, the small events share the causal consequences of the larger events. This is not the same as assuming that all *properties* of events share the causal consequences of those events, for although properties of events can help explain why those events have certain effects, properties of events do not, *themselves,* have effects. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Given that we should not use the individuating-by-consequences criterion, it remains an interesting question how we ought to individuate events. I don’t have a positive proposal to offer here, but it seems as though the correct principle should have the implication that in Technology, each of the 36,704 uses of technology is part of the cause of the future people’s cancer. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. My solution to the inconsequentiality problem is similar to the answer that Goldman (1999) offers to the question of why citizens should vote. Indeed, the view I lay out here can be interpreted as a further development and specification of Goldman’s general approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Gardner (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The implications this case might have for a theory of harming are discussed by Woodward (1986) and then by Parfit (1986), Woodward (1987), Shiffrin (1999), Harman (2004), Bradley (2009), and my (2019a). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)