"*My* Emissions Make No Difference": Climate Change and the Argument from Inconsequentialism

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"Since the actions I perform as an individual only have an inconsequential effect on the threat of climate change," a common argument goes, "it cannot be morally wrong for me to take my car to work everyday or refuse to recycle." This argument has received a lot of scorn from philosophers over the years, but has actually been defended in some recent articles. A more systematic treatment of a central set of related issues (moral mathematics, collective action, side effects, green virtues) shows how maneuvering around these issues is no easy philosophical task. In the end, it appears, the argument from inconsequentialism indeed is correct in typical cases, but there are also important qualificatory considerations.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to most experts, the current threat of climate change is partly due to human activities on the collective level: global temperature levels are likely to rise due to the massive amounts of greenhouse gases (such as carbon dioxide and methane) emitted primarily by industrial nations. The only way to avert this threat is to significantly decrease our output of these gases, and doing so is not an easy task—many indeed argue that only a global political agreement will do the job. In this context, it is perhaps understandable that some people feel that it makes little difference what they do as individuals. I do not personally make climate change more likely to happen if I fail to recycle my milk cartons—it is the massive scale of our collective emissions that is the problem. Similarly the increase in global temperature would not be (much?) less likely if I were to walk to work every day instead of taking my car. Since the actions I perform as an individual only have an inconsequential (or sometimes even no) effect on the threat of climate change, a common idea goes, it cannot be (seriously) wrong of me to take my car or refuse to recycle.

We may call this position the argument from inconsequentialism.[1] Most environmentalists—and indeed a large part of the general public—think that this argument is flawed. Justifying one's environmental inaction by simply saying that "*my* contribution, taken in isolation, is inconsequential" may feel like a poor

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[1] The term is inspired by Ronald Sandler, "Ethical Theory and the Problem of Inconsequentialism: Why Environmental Ethicists Should be Virtue-Oriented Ethicists," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23 (2010): 167–83.

excuse for not taking on the burdens associated with acting more environmentally responsible. This could also be said to be the dominant view in the philosophical community—for instance, Derek Parfit famously holds that the argument builds on "mistakes in moral mathematics"[2] and Christopher Kutz contends that it exemplifies an "ethical solipsism" which is "radically mistaken."[3] However, at least a few authors have tried to defend the argument. In a recent and important paper, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong defends the view that the threat of climate change "is such a large problem that it is not individuals who cause it or who need to fix it."[4] Indeed, he suggests that it would be "better to enjoy your Sunday driving while working to change the law so as to make it illegal for you to enjoy your Sunday driving."[5]

In this paper, my aim is to give further support to the latter camp. More specifically, I aim to improve on Sinnott-Armstrong's paper by providing a more systematic treatment of a central set of philosophical issues and debates. I first introduce the argument from inconsequentialism and the philosophical challenge to which it gives rise in more detail. Thereafter, I discuss what I take to be the four most common ways of characterizing and theorizing around its flaws: in section three, I discuss competing conceptions of moral mathematics; in section four, I discuss the moral import of collective behavior; in section five, I take a longer look at possible side effects; and in section six, I discuss recent appeals to green virtues. By engaging more thoroughly with these issues, my aim is to produce a more balanced defence of the argument from inconsequentialism than those presented by previous authors. The resulting position may be described as a *comprehensive consequentialist* view, consequentialist because it generally accepts the argument but comprehensive because it adds a number of qualificatory considerations.

II. PRELIMINARIES

What makes the threat of climate change morally salient is, arguably, its projected harmful effects: as global temperature levels rise, devastating floods, violent storms, and horrific droughts may either kill, displace, or simply make life hard for substantial parts of the Earth's population. There are still many uncertainties concerning which of these effects (if any) are likely to happen, and they may affect different populations differently. In any case, the most natural starting point for ethical discussions in this context is a principle that focuses on the wrongness of inflicting harm on people. But how should such a principle be formulated more precisely?

The argument from inconsequentialism is based on an appeal to what we may

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[2] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), chap. 3.

[3] Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 17.

[4] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations," in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard B. Howarth, eds., *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics* (Burlington: Emerald Group Publishing, 2005), p. 304.

[5] Ibid.

call *marginal* harm or, more generally, marginal effects. The marginal effects of an action are the features of the outcome which depend directly on this action being performed—i.e., the difference between what happens as a result of the action and what would have happened otherwise (had the action not been performed, or had a relevantly different action been performed).[6] On this conception of effects, I only inflict harm on others if I cause some harm to occur which would not have occurred had I not acted in this particular way. Donald Regan calls this position the "marginal consequences approach"[7] and Kutz calls it the "individual difference principle."[8] I suggest that this position is an immensely intuitive notion of harm which we should not give up very easily; harming others is at least most saliently wrong when we cause marginal harm.

Now there are a number of slightly different situations in which the marginal effects of our acts are insignificant or non-existent, and it may thus be prudent to characterize these in some further detail before we proceed. A first sort of case may tentatively be exemplified by direct emissions of greenhouse gases from individuals. When I drive my car to work, I emit a certain measure of carbon dioxide (roughly 8.8 kg. per gallon of gasoline). These emissions contribute to the massive amount of carbon dioxide emitted globally every year—roughly twenty-eight gigatons—which is what is currently posing a climate change threat. However, my emissions are obviously an extremely small part of these global emissions. In any relevant practical sense, they are undetectable and negligible. Given that I cannot change what others do, climate change is not noticeably more likely to happen if I drive my car to work—not even, it seems, if I do so everyday during my entire lifetime.

It should be noted that I only focus on the *emissions* caused by my driving to work in this example. A number of circumstances in real life make matters more complicated, but I am abstracting from these here (although I return to some of them later on). Thus, we should not at this stage have any particular idea about, e.g., what my motivation for driving to work may be, what I feel about walking instead, where the money for which I buy gasoline goes, to what extent my driving may cause traffic accidents or jams, and so on. Furthermore, we may tentatively assume that I cannot change what others do—which I later show is a central problem in context. Given all of these factors, it seems that my contribution to the threat of climate change is inconsequential.

A second sort of case is perhaps even more interesting and can tentatively be exemplified by *indirect* emissions from individuals. Many environmentalists suggest that flying is a terrible way of travelling since airplanes emit considerable amounts of hazardous gases. A round trip from Stockholm to Paris in a Boeing 737–800, e.g., generates roughly thirty-five tons of carbon dioxide. But how much of this

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[6] This formulation is left vague by intention in order to be compatible with both consequentialist and non-consequentialist considerations—cf. Frank Jackson, "Group Morality," in Philip Pettit, Richard Sylvan, and Jean Norman, eds., *Metaphysics and Morality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 94–95.

[7] Donald Regan, *Utilitarianism and Co-operation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 13.

[8] Kutz, *Complicity*, p. 3.

pollution does an individual passenger cause? Well, in a very direct sense it is obviously the airplane which emits the gases and not the passengers. More importantly, the choices of a single individual very seldom influence whether a particular flight will take place or not—i.e., whether there will be a flight from Stockholm to Paris on any given day will not depend on whether *I* go on that flight. If we once again abstract from all other circumstances, it would seem that my behavior actually has *no* marginal effect here. Just as much carbon dioxide will be emitted irrespective of whether I go to Paris.[9]

I said above that the appeal to marginal harm seems intuitively attractive. But now many people would probably say that it gives the wrong answer in these sorts of cases—at least most environmentalists would. So is the appeal to marginal effects flawed as well? Unlike how Sinnott-Armstrong presents it,[10] I suggest that the philosophical challenge in the present context most naturally is understood exactly as the challenge of sorting out this inconsistency in our moral intuitions. That is, the challenge is sorting out the inconsistency between our (more theoretical) attraction to the appeal to marginal effects and our (more particular) intuition that there is something wrong with the argument from inconsequentialism. I show below that most previous authors argue that the appeal to marginal effects indeed needs to be modified or abandoned entirely, but my own suggestion is that we do better by simply supplementing it with certain qualificatory considerations.

III. MORAL MATHEMATICS

Probably the easiest way in which previous authors have tried to account for the anti-inconsequentialism intuition is by modifying the appeal to marginal effects slightly. I discuss two suggestions to this effect here, both resting on the idea that the argument from inconsequentialism consists in a misunderstanding of "moral mathematics"—i.e., a mistake in how to distribute individual responsibility (or carve up causality) for complex collective enterprises.

Imperceptible Harms and Benefits

The most common "fix" in the present context is an appeal to so-called imperceptible harms and benefits. This appeal represents a fairly straightforward idea,

[9] If this is not strictly true because my added weight would make the airplane heavier and therefore cause it to emit more carbon dioxide, we may assume that another passenger would take my seat.

[10] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," pp. 288–89. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that we cannot trust *any* of our intuitions in this context and so the philosophical challenge is to find plausible moral *principles* to which we can appeal—see also Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral intuitionism and empirical psychology," in Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, eds., *Metaethics after Moore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). But I wonder how one decides whether a given moral principle is plausible or not without consulting one's moral intuitions (for more on this point, see Joakim Sandberg and Niklas Juth, "Ethics and Intuitions: A Reply to Singer," *The Journal of Ethics* 15 [2011]: 2-9–26). Indeed, I show below that many of Sinnott-Armstrong's arguments appeal very directly to intuitions.

namely, that even inconsequential contributions are *contributions* and so must matter to at least *some* extent. Even though my driving to work emits a very small amount of carbon dioxide, e.g., the harmful nature of this amount becomes clearer when we consider the enormous amount of people that it may affect. Say that I am one of a billion people who collectively cause climate change to happen through driving our cars to work every day. Still, if we assume that climate change destroys the lives of two billion people, one could say that what I do is morally equivalent to destroying two people's lives.[11] The relevant calculation here is the amount of people harmed (two billion) times my part in its cause (a billionth). As long as the amount of people harmed is very large, then, it can be a mistake to ignore seemingly negligible or imperceptible contributions.

Proponents of this view usually justify it by reference to one of two arguments. Michael Otsuka suggests that the argument from inconsequentialism is paradoxical roughly in the same manner as the ancient *Sorites* paradox.[12] If everyone who contributed to the threat of climate change were only emitting greenhouse gases in insignificant amounts, it would seem that *no one* is responsible for causing this threat on this view—since insignificant contributions are neglected. But the threat of climate change is very real and it is caused by us all. The solution to the paradox is then to say that even though I do not make climate change *perceptibly* more likely to happen if I drive my car, I make it *imperceptibly* more likely to happen and I am still responsible for this contribution. This responsibility is not unimportant since climate change indeed will destroy the lives of very many people if it happens.

Parfit argues in a more intuition-driven way. He asks us to consider a case in which a thousand torturers have a thousand victims.[13] These torturers have a seemingly ingenious way of attempting to avoid individual responsibility: instead of going after one victim each, every torturer presses a button which inflicts only a thousandth of some electrical current on all of the victims. The collective result is that all thousand of the victims feel severe pain but none of the torturers now makes any victim's pain perceptibly worse. Is this an acceptable way of avoiding moral responsibility?

Parfit suggests that this example is similar to the kind of collective dilemmas that we constantly face in modern societies, and the torturers' behavior obviously strikes most people as immoral. His solution is the same as Otsuka's: namely, that inflicting a thousandth of severe pain on a thousand victims is morally equivalent to inflicting severe pain on one victim directly.

Sinnott-Armstrong says very little about the appeal to imperceptible harms. He simply suggests that it is irrelevant in the present context since one needs to distinguish

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[11] This figure is indeed defended by John Nolt, "How Harmful are the Average American's Greenhouse Gas Emissions?" *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 14 (2001): 3–10.

[12] Michael Otsuka, "The Paradox of Group Beneficence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 132–49.

[13] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 80.

between contributing to *climate change* as such, and merely contributing to the *threat* of climate change, or what he wants to call global warming:

> You might think that my driving on Sunday raises the temperature of the globe by an infinitesimal amount. I doubt that, but, even if it does, my exhaust on Sunday does not cause any climate change at all. No storms or floods or droughts or heat waves can be traced to my individual act of driving. It is these climate changes that cause harms to people. Global warming by itself causes no harm without climate change. Hence, since my individual act of driving on that one Sunday does not cause any climate change, it causes no harm to anyone.[14]

This argument is interesting. Unfortunately I think Sinnott-Armstrong is making things too easy for himself here since it would seem that environmentalists attracted to the appeal to imperceptible harms have access to an obvious response. They may simply regard the *threat* of climate change (or global warming) as a harm in and of itself. My driving to work every day may contribute to an increased *risk* of climate change,[15] and perhaps risks should be considered as a separate category of harms. Climate change is not *much* more likely to happen because I drive to work, but this is a different matter which the appeal to imperceptible harm is supposed to fix. Kristin Schrader-Frechette indeed suggests that the best candidate for what could be an *imperceptible* harm á la Parfit is exactly an increased *risk* of harm.[16]

I take the consideration above to suggest that the distinction between climate change and global warming is not enough to deflect the appeal to imperceptible harms. However, there is another distinction which I think does the intended job better: that between direct and indirect contributions mentioned above (my driving to work and my flying to Paris). Even if risks are harms, it should be noted, the appeal to imperceptible harms cannot explain what is wrong with my flying to Paris. In this case, namely, I do not contribute to the threat of climate change even imperceptibly—because exactly as much carbon dioxide will be emitted irrespective of whether I go or stay at home.

I have more to say about the appeal to imperceptible harms below. But let me first briefly introduce a different suggestion about how the appeal to marginal effects could be modified so as to give the "right" answer also in this second sort of case.

Contributory Effects

Few environmentalists accept that a single individual's flying behavior has absolutely no environmental impact. But then what sort of impact do they think that

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[14] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," p. 291.

[15] If this is not strictly true because the emissions caused by previous generations have made the threat of (at least some) climate change irreversible, my driving to work may still contribute to the risk of further harms connected with climate change caused by our present emissions.

[16] Kristin Shrader-Frechette, "Parfit and Mistakes in Moral Mathematics," *Ethics* 98 (1987): 50–60.

it has? Well, it may interestingly be noted that there are now a number of websites which allow individuals to calculate what impact their air travels have on global warming.[17] These typically suggest that I personally generate 250 kg. of carbon dioxide if I go on the round trip from Stockholm to Paris in a Boeing 737-800, which simply is the amount generated by the aircraft divided by the average number of passengers. Far from being morally neutral, I suggest that these calculations rely on a rather specific moral principle. What matters when assessing the impact of a particular action is not just the direct effects of this action taken in isolation, but also the action's place in relation to certain collective enterprises.

Some philosophers have explicitly defended a moral principle of this sort. E.g., Singer suggests that "[a]n act may *contribute* to a result without being either a necessary or sufficient condition of it, and if it does contribute, the act-utilitarian should take this contribution into account."[18] Singer primarily appeals to this kind of contributions to explain why voting for the right party in a general election can be a good thing, even though no individual vote has any marginal effect.[19] Regan calls this the "contributory consequences approach"[20]—that is, an approach which allows effects which the individual only *takes part in* realizing. This approach is distinguishable from what he calls the "marginal consequences approach," which only allows effects for which one is a necessary and sufficient condition.

The appeal to contributory effects is similar to the idea of imperceptible harms and benefits in its purely mathematical aspects, but it also gives the "right" answer in cases of indirect emissions. Say that I am one of a billion people who collectively cause climate change to happen through constantly flying back and forth to Paris. I here cannot influence the amount of greenhouse gases emitted at all so my flying has no marginal effect (it is not even imperceptible). But if we once again assume that two billion people's lives are destroyed, what I do is still morally equivalent to destroying two people's lives. The responsibility for our collective harms is distributed equally to all the individuals making up the relevant collective.

Sorting Out the Mathematics

Is an appeal to contributory effects morally plausible? Sinnott-Armstrong says nothing about this issue. However, I think Regan's examples,[21] adapted by Parfit himself,[22] persuasively show that it is not. We are asked to consider a situation in which

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[17] For more on this, see Christian N. Jardine, "Calculating the Carbon Dioxide Emissions of Flights," report of the Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University Centre for the Environment (2009).

[18] Peter Singer, "Is Act-Utilitarianism Self-Defeating?" *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972): 94–104 (emphasis added).

[19] See also Alvin Goldman, "Why Citizens Should Vote: A Causal Responsibility Approach," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999): 201–17.

[20] Regan, *Utilitarianism and Co-operation*, p. 13.

[21] Ibid., pp. 14–16.

[22] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 67–68.

a hundred miners are trapped in a shaft with flood waters rising. My fellow rescuers and I are able to save certain numbers of miners by standing on various platforms.

In a first variation, I can save 100 miners with the help of three other rescuers or I can go elsewhere and single-handedly save ten miners. If I do not join the rescue mission, then a fifth rescuer will. What should I do? Well, on the contributory effects approach, it seems, I should join the collective mission and save the 100 men. Even if the fifth rescuer would join in I would get credit for saving a fifth of the 100—twenty men—and this is more than I would get credit for by single-handedly saving ten. But this is clearly counterintuitive. If I join the collective mission, then ten people will needlessly die.

In a second variation I can save 100 miners with the help of three others but this time I can go elsewhere and single-handedly save fifty miners. Now there is no fifth rescuer. What should I do? On the contributory effects approach, I should seemingly not join this rescue mission because I would then only get credit for saving a fourth of the 100—twenty-five men—which is less than the fifty I could save single-handedly. But this is once again highly counterintuitive. The 100 would then not be saved and fifty more people than needed would die.

Regan suggests that examples such as these cast severe doubts on the contributory effects approach.[23] I contend that they indeed do something more; they show just how attached we are to the original appeal to marginal effects. What really drives our intuitions to these cases, it should be noted, is exactly what difference I can make on the *margin*, or in isolation. In the first variation I should not join the collective mission because the 100 will be saved anyway (and I should then save the additional ten). In the second variation I should join the collective mission because the 100 will not be saved without my individual contribution. We are thus clearly attracted to the appeal to marginal effects and should not give it up too easily. We would do better in finding some other way of accounting for the intuition that the argument from inconsequentialism is flawed.

Let us now return to the appeal to imperceptible harms and benefits—does it appeal fare any better in this context? For roughly similar reasons I believe that it does not. Consider first the following case which Parfit calls "The Single Torturer."

> One day only one torturer comes in to work and presses his button, thereby inflicting only a thousandth of some electrical current on a thousand victims. The victims already feel fairly severe pain from the tortures of previous days but no victim's pain becomes perceptibly worse on this day. Is what this single torturer does seriously morally wrong?[24]

Parfit suggests that it is, although he concedes that many people do not share his intuition (and therefore he ultimately gives little weight to the appeal to imperceptible harms). I am fairly confident in my intuition that the single torturer

[23] Regan, *Utilitarianism and Co-operation*, pp. 14–16.
[24] Adapted from Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 81.

does not act wrongly, but there are even more problematic cases for the appeal to imperceptible harms. Remember that this view not only criticizes the single torturer's behavior but indeed claims that it is morally equivalent to causing severe pain to a single victim. Even fewer people are ready to accept *this* claim. Say that the single torturer can choose between either pressing the button that inflicts a thousandth of the electrical current needed to cause severe pain on all the victims, or pull a switch which inflicts slightly-less-than-severe pain on one of the victims directly. Either he causes a thousand victims to feel imperceptible pain, or one victim to feel fairly severe pain.

In this case it would seem that the torturer ought to do the former—i.e., he should inflict imperceptible pain on all thousand victims.[25] But if so, it simply cannot be true that a thousand times a thousandth adds up to what is morally equivalent to one. Once again, I suggest that what drives our moral intuitions in these cases is what difference the single torturer makes on the margin. Thus, all we have found so far only seems to support the original appeal to marginal effects and, thereby, also the argument from inconsequentialism.

IV. THE MORAL IMPORT OF COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

Maybe moral mathematics is the wrong way to go. Now what both the appeal to imperceptible harms and the appeal to contributory effects attempt to do, one may note, is basically to *individualize*—or to distribute to the individual level—certain effects which really stem from *collective* activities. But perhaps focusing directly on the collective level then can prove to be more fruitful. The previous literature on the subject contains two main variations of this theme; ideas which appeal to the actions of counterfactual and actual groups, respectively. I start by discussing these two and then present a third variation which I think is more fruitful.

The Generalization Test

Some environmentalists contend that the argument from inconsequentialism is flawed in a more fundamental way than I have discussed so far. Instead of thinking in terms of "what would happen if *I* did this?" they suggest, when pondering one's responsibilities in the environmental realm, one should be thinking "what would happen if *everyone* did this?" After all we want a morality that could work if everyone abided by it. Simply saying that "*my* emissions make no difference" may seem to amount to making an exception for oneself, and also to laying the burdens for creating a more sustainable world on everyone else.[26] Environmentalists who

[25] For similar arguments see Jackson, "Group Morality," and Torbjörn Tännsjö, "The Morality of Collective Actions," *Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (1989): 221–28.

[26] See, e.g., James Garvey, *The Ethics of Climate Change: Right and Wrong in a Warming World* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).

find this morally problematic invite us to apply what Jonathan Glover calls the "generalization test."[27]

The generalization test is most directly inspired by Kant's moral philosophy, but may be given slightly different interpretations. Kant famously suggests that the question "what if everyone did that?" lies at the heart of all morality since acting morally is to act on (what could be made into) universal laws.[28] However, Kant gives a rather special, and dare I say counterintuitive, interpretation of the generalization test: what we should be asking ourselves is first and foremost whether it is *logically possible* to see the *maxims* (intentions) on which we act made into universal laws. I do not discuss this version of the test here, partly because I think Sinnott-Armstrong persuasively argues against its relevance to our present concerns.[29]

A better version of the generalization test appeals to the *effects* of everyone acting in a certain way. This version is only half-Kantian, or perhaps rule-consequentialist: according to rule-consequentialism, what is morally important is not the consequences of a certain act as such but rather the consequences of everyone's following a rule which allows or prescribes this kind of act. This version of the generalization test fairly straightforwardly rationalizes the intuition that the argument from inconsequentialism is flawed. It would have terrible consequences if everyone took their car to work instead of walking and always went by airplane when travelling longer distances. Indeed, it is exactly the fact that so many of us do so that is causing the threat of climate change.

But is the appeal to this generalization test plausible? I cannot give adequate treatment to all that can be said about this test, but only point to a few problems. The most obvious problem is that it is easy to think of situations in which the generalization test has absurd implications. It would certainly be disastrous if everyone were celibate because no future generations would then be born. Similarly it would have devastating effects if everyone lived in Sweden, since even though Sweden is rich in natural resources, these resources in no way could sustain the Earth's entire population. Yet it seems absurd to say that it is morally *wrong* to be celibate or to live in Sweden.

Why does the generalization test have these implications? Well, at least part of the problem seems rooted in that it appeals to *counterfactual* effects. The test asks us to consider what *would* happen if everyone acted in a certain way, irrespective of how many people now *are* acting in this way, or even *can be expected to continue* to act in this way in the near future. Since only a few people currently are celibate, it would not be wrong of me to choose a celibate life *in this world* (but perhaps it

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[27] Jonathan Glover, "It Makes no Difference Whether or Not I do It," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* supplementary vol. 49 (1975): 171–90.

[28] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

[29] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," pp. 294–95. See also Kutz, *Complicity*, pp. 132–37, 176; and Sandler, "Ethical Theory and the Problem of Inconsequentialism," pp. 173–75.

would if enough other people were celibate). Environmentalist proponents of the generalization test often suggest that we are only allowed to use natural resources in a "sustainable" way—i.e., in a way which is consistent with everyone else using the resources in the same way.[30] Yet the same environmentalists sometimes suggest that their own country should reduce its emissions more radically because other countries fail to abide by this ideal. I submit that they do so because it simply is absurd not to take into account what other people do.

Now perhaps the absurd implications above could be avoided by modifying the test. According to some philosophers, considerations like those above raise the issue of exactly what kind of action or rule the test should be applied to (i.e., how to understand "that" in the question "What if everyone did *that*?"). It may, e.g., seem reasonable to include considerations of what other people are likely to do. However, the effect of such a move seems to be that *rule*-consequentialism collapses back into *act*-consequentialism, i.e., the appeal to marginal effects with which we started.[31] It would not have disastrous effects if all people, *if they were in my shoes,* took their car to work instead of walking, e.g., because we already know that *my* actions only have a negligible impact on the threat of climate change.

Being Part of a Group

Given the problems with appealing to counterfactual collective behavior, it may seem more promising to appeal to the effects of actual collective behavior. When I drive my car to work or fly to Paris, I could be said to be part of a larger group of people whose *joint* behavior is what currently is causing the threat of climate change. What makes my behavior morally problematic is, according to this new suggestion, exactly my membership in that group.

This is the solution that Parfit ultimately settles on, although I have noted how he flirts with the appeal to imperceptible harms. "Even if an act harms no one," he writes, "this act may be wrong because it is one of a *set* of acts that *together* harm other people. Similarly, even if some act benefits no one, it can be what someone ought to do, because it is one of a set of acts that together benefit other people."[32] Garrett Cullity defends a similar but slightly more complicated view. When a number of people already are performing acts of a certain kind which together create some benefit (say, donating to charity), he thinks that it is *unfair* of me not to perform a similar act—in the same way as free riding on public goods is unfair. I do not comment on the specifics of this argument here; suffice it to note that he thinks that "Parfit's central claim is right," namely, that "my action of contributing to a

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[30] For more on this point, see Baylor L. Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," *Environmental Values* 12 (2003): 271–87.

[31] The classic formulation of this argument is David Lyons, *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

[32] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 70.

pool for beneficence can . . . be morally required because it is part of a collective action that confers a perceptible benefit."[33]

I think there is something to the appeal to collective behavior in the present context, but not in this particular way. We may first ask exactly what makes me a part of the group whose joint behavior is causing the threat of climate change. A natural first suggestion may be that it is my performing certain types of acts—i.e., that I drive or fly. But on closer examination, I contend, this suggestion is question-begging.[34] We have already established that my flying as such does not contribute to the threat of climate change and so in this way my flying is similar to, e.g., my eating ice cream or having a cocktail in the airport lounge. Why am I then a member of the responsible group only if I perform the first sort of act? Appeals to the fact that I am *closer* to the harmful activity when I fly, or that I am somehow *physically* involved, seem arbitrary. Kutz suggests that I become a member of the responsible group by having certain "participatory intentions,"[35] which seems more promising, but there are problems with this idea as well (I return to this issue below).

Parfit discusses the related problem of overdetermination. Say that two people, *X* and *Y,* simultaneously shoot me and that I die as a result. Even though neither *X*'s nor *Y*'s action has any negative *marginal* utility (because I would have died by the other's shot anyway), we intuitively want to hold both accountable for my death. But why, Parfit asks, is the responsible group only *X* and *Y* and not, e.g., *X, Y,* and Fred Astaire? His solution is that "[w]hen some group together harm or benefit other people, this group is the *smallest* group of whom it is true that, if they had all acted differently, the other people would not have been harmed, or benefited."[36] I take this solution to be the theoretically most plausible suggestion in the context. But it should be noted that I am *not* part of the group responsible for the threat of climate change on this view. If everyone else had acted differently, the threat of climate change would namely have been avoided; so my contribution is entirely dispensable. Parfit here needs his appeal to imperceptible harms to make me a part of the responsible group.[37]

The considerations above indicate that appealing to membership in larger groups has deep technical problems. I suggest that these complement the intuitive problems highlighted by Sinnott-Armstrong. His argument is that appealing to groups gives the wrong recommendations in certain central examples. Here is one:

> Suppose that everyone in an airport is talking loudly. If only a few people were talking, there would be no problem. But the collective effect of so many people talking makes

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[33] Garrett Cullity, "Pooled Beneficence," in Michael J. Almeida, *Imperceptible Harms and Benefits* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 6.

[34] For a similar argument see Björn Petersson, "The Second Mistake in Moral Mathematics is Not about the Worth of Mere Participation," *Utilitas* 16 (2004): 288–315.

[35] Kutz, *Complicity*, pp. 184–91.

[36] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 71–72.

[37] This point is acknowledged in a later paper, Derek Parfit, "Comments," *Ethics* 96 (1986): 832–72.

> it hard to hear announcements, so some people miss their flights. Suppose, in these circumstances, I say loudly (but not too loudly), "I wish everyone would be quiet." My speech does not seem immoral, since it alone does not harm anyone. Maybe there should be a rule (or law) against such loud speech in this setting . . . , but if there is not (as I am assuming) then it does not seem immoral to do what others do, as long as they are going to do it anyway, so the harm is going to occur anyway.[38]

The example is designedly trivial so as to diminish possible emotional interference in our intuitions, according to Sinnott-Armstrong. I suggest that it *at least* shows that we are not *always* ready to say that it is morally wrong to ϕ when many other people also are ϕ-ing and this collective behavior leads to bad effects. Thus, the appeal to groups also comes at a certain intuitive cost, just like the appeal to imperceptible harms.

The Obligations of Collectives

Sinnott-Armstrong ultimately judges that focusing on groups takes us nowhere in the present context.[39] But I think this solution is highly counterintuitive. Even though there may be technical problems with the two suggestions above, there is at least *some* moral import in the fact that our collective behavior currently is causing the threat of climate change, is there not? But how can we express this intuition in a better way?

My suggestion is that we have a *collective* obligation to change *our* ways, and this collective obligation may be partly separate from the obligations of individuals. While my own flying makes no difference, it should be noted, climate change could be averted if we all changed our ways. But then it seems plausible to say that we act wrongly as a *collective*, even though no individual driver or flyer may be doing anything wrong.[40] This view could be further explained by saying that moral questions can be asked on at least two different levels, with implicit reference to different sorts of agents. It is one thing to ask "What should *I* do?" but quite a different thing to ask "What should *we* do?" and the answers may not always converge.

This view helps us to maintain that some kind of wrongdoing is involved when, e.g., *X* and *Y* simultaneously shoot me, while at the same time being consistent with the appeal to marginal effects. While neither the actions of *X* nor *Y* make any difference on their own; namely, the collective *X-and-Y* acts wrongly. Indeed, it may be noted that the marginal effect of *X*-and-*Y*'s *joint* behavior is harmful exactly in the intuitive and straightforward sense.[41]

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[38] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," p. 298.

[39] Ibid., pp. 298–99.

[40] This view has also been defended by Jackson, "Group Morality," and Tännsjö, "The Morality of Collective Actions."

[41] For a more in-depth treatment of this case, see Frank Jackson, "Which Effects?" in Jonathan Dancy, ed., *Reading Parfit* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

I should concede that the idea about collective moral obligations I am putting forward here currently is controversial.[42] One of the main arguments against it is that the kind of "collective" which I am part of when I drive or fly (basically, the set of everyone who drives or flies) seems too *loose* to be able to have moral obligations. Many suggest that collectives at least need to be organized or structured in a way which allows them to act exactly as collective agents—for instance, to have a common goal, or share some decision procedure—in order to be able to have obligations as collectives. Sinnott-Armstrong expresses this idea as follows:

> Different groups involve different relations between members. Orchestras and political parties, for example, plan to do what they do and adjust their actions to other members of the group in order to achieve a common goal. Such groups can be held responsible for their joint acts, even when no individual alone perform those acts. However, gas-guzzler drivers do not form this kind of group. Gas-guzzler drivers do not share goals, do not make plans together, and do not adjust their acts to each other (at least usually).[43]

I agree that gas-guzzler drivers may not share a common goal nor have an established procedure for making collective decisions, but I do not think this precludes them from having a collective moral obligation not to be gas-guzzler drivers. My argument is this: that they have such an obligation is the best explanation of our intuition that they, if they can, ought to *establish* a procedure for making collective decisions. It seems intuitive to say that all drivers and flyers ought to get together and collectively decide to stop being drivers and flyers—because their collective behavior is currently causing a threat of climate change. Most environmentalists would agree with this view. But what can explain this obligation? It would seem that it is exactly their collective obligation to stop driving and flying. (I submit that the present suggestion indeed is the best mix between appeals to counterfactual and actual collective behavior.)

Another problem with my suggestion is that it may seem strange how a collective may have a certain obligation without *any* of the individuals constituting it having the correlating obligation. In what was just said, however, we can see a new way of (re-)connecting collective with individual morality. To the extent that some individual has the possibility of *making* a larger collective respond to its collective obligation, of course, this is what this individual ought to do. Let us now discuss this idea further.

V. SIDE EFFECTS

So far I have only been concerned with the emissions as such, but let us now get back to some further empirical circumstances surrounding my driving and flying

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[42] The debate is sometimes formulated as one about "autonomous" collective responsibility—see, e.g., the special issue of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 30 (2006): 1–337.

[43] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," pp. 297–98.

which we earlier put in brackets. It is sometimes suggested that the argument from inconsequentialism fails to take into account all of the effects, or the full extent of the effects, which individuals' actions have. My taking my car to work every day may, e.g., have an effect on the demand for gasoline in my neighborhood, it may increase traffic congestion and make accidents more likely to happen, and it may have an effect on others who, inspired by my example, feel that they also can take their car to work every day. Similarly my flying to Paris may have an effect on the airline with which I travel as well as on the travel behavior of others—both people I know and others whom I just meet in the airport bar. We may call these the possible *side effects* of my behavior.[44]

The most interesting of these are arguably the effects which I may have on the behavior of others. These kinds of effects namely put an interesting twist on the distinction between individual and collective effects: while one could say that up until now we have assumed a strict separation between the behavior of individuals on the one hand and the behavior of collectives on the other, perhaps doing so is just too strict. Through acting in a certain way, an individual may cause others to behave in the same way and thereby create a kind of collective effect. Regan calls this the *snowball effect*.[45] If my driving and flying typically has a snowball effect, it should be noted, it is harmful even on the straightforward appeal to marginal effects and so we do not need to amend or supplement it in any way. This solution has been defended by, e.g., Jan Narveson.[46]

I think that at least three things should be said about the appeal to side effects. First, I submit that it does not seem *impossible* that my driving or flying could have side effects of a sufficient magnitude to indeed make it harmful and therefore morally wrong. Sinnott-Armstrong argues, in a way congruent with his argument against the appeal to imperceptible harms, that side effects are irrelevant in the present context because "[t]he scale of climate change is just too big for me to cause it, even 'with a little help from my friends.'"[47] But once again he ignores the idea of increased risk as a separate form of harm. If we count risk as harm, I suggest that it is possible that my driving and flying at least *sometimes* may be harmful—of course, as long as the snowball effect is sufficiently pervasive.

Second, however, we must admit that it is extremely unlikely that it will be sufficiently pervasive in *typical* circumstances. Since these things are difficult to measure it is hard to say for sure, but it seems reasonable to take heed of the following two considerations in the context: to begin with, (1) there are reasons to believe that people often overestimate the importance of their own actions on others. Many of us simply *want* our actions to have an effect on others, because we would despair

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[44] I find Glover's original discussion of side effects in "It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I do It" to be useful.

[45] Regan, *Utilitarianism and Co-operation*, p. 43.

[46] Jan Narveson, "Utilitarianism, Group Actions, and Coordination, or Must the Utilitarian be a Buridan's Ass?" *Noûs* 10 (1976): 173–94.

[47] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," p. 292.

and think that our actions (or lives) were meaningless if we felt unable to impress even our closest family and friends. But wanting something to be the case does not make it so. In many cases, then, our belief in the snowball effect may just be wishful thinking.

To this consideration may be added (2) the difficulty in seeing how my driving or flying could work as an effective form of communication. This point becomes clearer if we reverse things and ponder possible communication strategies for progressive environmentalists. If I wanted to make as many others as possible reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases, then surely the optimal strategy would not be to simply reduce my own emissions and sit back hoping that others will follow my lead. Johnson argues that the fact that we often decide how to act in the environmental arena in this silent and non-communicative way is exactly what has led to today's situation, which he characterizes as a tragedy of the commons: "The strategy of voluntary, unilateral reductions in use of the commons fails precisely because it limits one's communication with others in ways that mimic the [tragedy of the commons] game and so produce its outcome."[48] Thus, if we really want others to change their ways, we should opt for more direct persuasion and, conversely, simply driving and flying is less likely to give rise to a snowball effect than, e.g., outright telling others that it is morally permissible to drive and fly.

The considerations above suggest that it is highly unlikely that typical individuals' driving and flying will give rise to a sufficiently pervasive snowball effect. But it may be noted that the last consideration opens up the way for a third point about these actions. Instead of driving and flying, I could obviously have tried to directly persuade people to change their ways in order to produce a *positive* collective effect, for instance, by telling everyone in the airport bar about the negative effects of flying, or writing a letter to some influential politician. Maybe we could say that my behavior was harmful in this *indirect* way. Sinnott-Armstrong may be after something similar when he contends that it would be "better to enjoy your Sunday driving while working to change the law so as to make it illegal for you to enjoy your Sunday driving"[49] (although I fail to understand why the first part should be necessary). This is also Johnson's conclusion:

> One has an obligation in an impending [tragedy of the commons], and it is to "do the right thing" without waiting for others. "The right thing" is not, however, a fruitless, unilateral reduction in one's use of the commons, but an attempt to promote an effective collective agreement that will coordinate reductions in commons use and therefore avert the aggregate harm.[50]

We must not let ourselves be carried away by this suggestion, since even direct attempts at persuading others to change their ways are unlikely to produce massive

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[48] Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," p. 276.
[49] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," p. 304.
[50] Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," p. 284.

snowball effects. But I may be able to have at least some impact on the likelihood (risk) of climate change with the help of enough "friends."

VI. GREEN VIRTUES

Although in the previous section, I invited readers to feel at least some optimism, many environmentalists may not be content with the ultimate contingency of the appeal to side effects. The latest way in which some philosophers have expressed this discontent is by drawing on the resources of virtue ethics. Both Dale Jamieson[51] and Sandler[52] suggest that a virtue-oriented solution not only should be attractive to people keen on Aristotle, but also for those attracted to the appeal to marginal effects. Only through an appeal to character traits, namely, can we avoid the kind of contingency inherent in appeals to both direct and side effects. Jamieson writes:

> Joyriding in my '57 Chevy will not in itself change the climate, nor will my refraining from driving stabilize the climate, though it might make me late for Sierra Club meetings. These are the sorts of considerations that lead people to drive their '57 Chevies to Sierra Club meetings, feeling good about the quality of their own lives, but bad about the prospects for the world. . . . Since everyone, both individuals and nations, can reason in this way, it appears that calculation leads to a downward spiral of non-cooperation. This should lead us to give up on calculation, and giving up on calculation should lead us to give up on contingency. Instead of looking to moral mathematics for practical solutions to large-scale collective action problems, we should focus instead on non-calculative generators of behavior: character traits, dispositions, emotions and what I shall call "virtues."[53]

As I understand it, the virtue-oriented approach in the present context can be broken down into two parts. First, (1) individuals are morally obliged to exhibit or develop certain environmentally friendly character traits, or "green virtues." On Jamieson's view these may include humility (toward nature), temperance (in consumption), mindfulness (toward the distant consequences and side effects of our actions), and cooperativeness (in relation to collective environmental projects).[54] Furthermore, (2) these character traits (at least typically and *prima facie*) require of individuals that they perform certain actions (such as recycling) even though they are not beneficial on their own and refrain from performing certain other actions (such as driving and flying) even though they are not harmful on their own. It is obviously this latter part which is at odds with the argument from inconsequentialism.

It may be noted that (1) can help explain our intuitive reaction to Parfit's torturers case: even though none of these torturers harms anyone, there may simply be something morally problematic with being a torturer or *intending to* inflict pain

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[51] Dale Jamieson, "When Utilitarians Should Be Virtue Theorists," *Utilitas* 19 (2007): 160–83.
[52] Sandler, "Ethical Theory and the Problem of Inconsequentialism."
[53] Jamieson, "When Utilitarians Should be Virtue Theorists," p. 167.
[54] Ibid., pp. 181–82.

on people. Now a potential worry for the applicability of this view to our present context is the disanalogy between this case and my driving and flying: most people who fly or drive their car to work are better described as *unintentionally*, and perhaps even *unknowingly*, acting in a potentially harmful way.

This is not only a problem for the virtue-oriented approach, it may be noted, but also for Kutz's idea of "participatory intentions" explaining why drivers and flyers (and not people in the airport bar, say) are part of the group responsible for the threat of climate change. Kutz suggests that there are ways of getting around this problem.[55] First of all, while drivers and flyers may not intend to be part of the group that causes the threat of climate change as such, they often intend to be part of a group characterized by a certain way of life which is inconsistent with environmental responsibility. Furthermore, Kutz suggests that certain actions may *indicate* or *symbolize* vicious character traits irrespective of what the agents themselves intend. In this latter argument, Kutz obviously goes beyond an appeal to group participation and approximates the virtue-oriented approach.

Sinnott-Armstrong makes a big point of the speculative nature of these last few remarks. As we have seen he discusses the example of driving a "gas guzzler" for fun, and writes: "How can we tell whether driving a gas guzzler for fun 'expresses a vice'? On the face of it, it expresses a desire for fun. There is nothing vicious about having fun."[56] While we can agree with this last point, I think Sinnott-Armstrong's argument in one sense misses its mark here. The point of the virtue-oriented approach is not simply (1) that certain intentions or character traits are morally reproachable as such, but also (2) that our obligation to exhibit more virtuous character traits directly require us to perform (or refrain from performing) certain *actions*. Irrespective of what character traits most people who drive or fly *actually* exhibit or indicate, then, maybe a fully virtuous person never would fly to Paris or take his or her car to work.

Having said this, I should add that there is a deeper problem with the virtue-oriented approach, namely, that it is not obvious that a fully virtuous person never *would* drive or fly. If driving and flying only very seldom are harmful because of direct or side effects, as I have said, a person who clings to the principle of *never* driving and flying would seem to exhibit a detachment from or nonchalance toward the real world. Johnson is on to something similar when he suggests that "[t]he belief that one should make unilateral reductions in one's use of the overused commons may be a reflection of the religious belief that one's chief concern is the welfare of one's own soul and that the practical consequences of one's choices are secondary."[57] In any case, I suggest that a virtuously green person cannot only have his or her head in the sky, but must also attend to the practical consequences

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[55] Kutz, *Complicity*, pp. 184–91.
[56] Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault," p. 295.
[57] Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," p. 283.

of his or her choices—and therefore he or she should agree that the fact that his or her driving and flying sometimes have no effects is morally relevant.[58]

The argument above indicates that we should reject (2). But must we therefore also conclude that the virtue-oriented approach takes us nowhere? I suggest not. We can namely still appeal to (1), and I believe doing so helps to further explain (at least some of) our intuitive reactions to my driving and my flying. More exactly (1) helps explain our reaction to the idea that the argument from inconsequentialism *as such* may justify my driving and flying. The idea here is that what is driving our intuitions in these cases partly may be that it seems morally problematic to *use this argument as an excuse* for driving or flying without consideration of the possible wider (side or collective) effects of such behavior. (I have not said that this is my motivation, but such an interpretation may be natural in the context.)

The appeal to green virtues should fairly straightforwardly mean that using the argument from inconsequentialism in this way is a display of a reproachable character trait and therefore morally blameworthy. Although the argument as such often is correct, namely, it seems inappropriate to use this as an excuse for environmental inaction or disregard—if anything, the argument should lead us to try even harder at doing something good (e.g., in the ways outlined previously). Now my present line of reasoning may seem inconsistent on its face, but it is consistent as long as we distinguish between the issues of what character traits we ought to have (or what kind of people we should be) and what actions we ought to perform (or what we ought to do).[58] Since my driving and flying seldom are harmful, it is seldom morally wrong for me to drive or fly. But I should not use this fact as an excuse for giving up on environmentalism altogether. Instead, I should direct my efforts toward other lines of action which are more likely to make a difference.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have tried to show how an extensive range of quite different ethical considerations can be brought to bear on the argument from inconsequentialism, and how the maneuvering around these considerations is no easy philosophical task. To summarize my conclusions, I have argued that we do best in adopting all of the following. (1) My driving or flying may sometimes be wrong because of effects, at least if we count increased risk as harm. It may be so when my driving or flying causes many others to drive or fly or, probably more often, when I could have done something else instead to make many others stop driving and flying. (2) In most cases, however, my decision to drive or fly will not make any difference in terms of marginal effects—at least not in relation to what ultimately matters in the context (the harms caused by climate change)—and so it will not be morally

[58] Interestingly this point is partially conceded by Jamieson, "When Utilitarians Should be Virtue Theorists," who admits that *non-complacency* often is a virtue.

wrong. In this sense, I have argued, the argument from inconsequentialism is actually correct in typical cases.

But a few further considerations need to be added to this point: (3) *Using* the argument from inconsequentialism as an *excuse* for environmental inaction is often a display of a reproachable character trait. Although doing so may not make any *actions* morally wrong, the issue of what *character traits* we ought to have is also an issue of great moral importance. Finally, (4) we are all under a *collective* obligation to reduce our negative impact on the environment. While it may not typically be wrong of *me* to drive or fly, then, it may be wrong of *us* to do so and we must therefore seek ways of coordinating our environmental efforts more effectively.

My conclusions may be described as a *comprehensive consequentialist* view. It is consequentialist because it generally accepts the argument from inconsequentialism, but comprehensive because it adds a number of qualificatory considerations. My hope is that readers will find these conclusions to constitute a more balanced view than what previous philosophers have presented. Or at least it should be more balanced than what previous consequentialists have defended.

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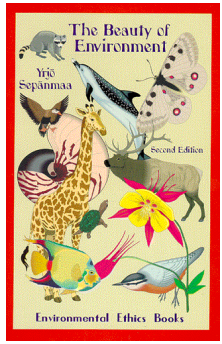

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