



The Case for 'Contributory Ethics': Or How to Think about Individual Morality in a Time of Global Problems

Travis N. Rieder & Justin Bernstein

To cite this article: Travis N. Rieder & Justin Bernstein (2020): The Case for 'Contributory Ethics': Or How to Think about Individual Morality in a Time of Global Problems, *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, DOI: [10.1080/21550085.2020.1848188](https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2020.1848188)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2020.1848188>



Published online: 18 Nov 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Case for ‘Contributory Ethics’: Or How to Think about Individual Morality in a Time of Global Problems

Travis N. Rieder^a and Justin Bernstein^b

^aBerman Institute of Bioethics, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA; ^bFlorida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

Many of us believe that we can and do have individual obligations to refrain from contributing to massive collective harms – say, from producing luxury greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; however, our individual actions are so small as to be practically meaningless. Can we then, justify the intuition that we ought to refrain? In this paper, we argue that this debate may have been mis-framed. Rather than investigating whether or not we have obligations to refrain from contributing to collective action, perhaps we should ask whether we have reason to do so. However, this framing brings challenges of its own, and so we close by asking what problems are generated if we focus on these questions of ‘contributory ethics’.

KEYWORDS

Causal impotence objection; climate change; contributory ethics; obligation; reasons

In recent years, a small philosophical literature has sprung up around what sure looks like a pressing ethical problem. In short, the problem is this: many of us believe that we can and do have individual obligations to refrain from contributing to massive collective harms – say, from producing luxury greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; however, our individual actions are so small as to be practically meaningless. Can we then, justify the intuition that we ought to refrain? Or should we abandon this intuition and admit that there is nothing wrong with taking a transatlantic flight, say, for the sake of a nice lunch?

In our ever larger, more complex, globalized society, the outcome of this debate would seem to have serious repercussions for the field of ethics. Our individual contributions to massive public health crises like climate change, our participation in a global agricultural system that utilizes slave labor, and our support of factory farming systems that torture animals, all seem to be prime targets of important ethical inquiry. Are our individual actions permissible? Are they criticizable in some way? If so, how?

The recognition of the philosophical puzzle regarding individual contributions to collective harms can seem to hold a broad set of ethical issues hostage to a highly theoretical debate. Insofar as we at least sometimes look to ethics to be action-guiding – and insofar as the issues at stake seem to be rather urgent – we might want to move beyond this debate and ask some more concrete normative questions. For instance: even if we can vindicate the pre-reflective intuition that we ought not contribute to collective harms, what kind of action guidance does that view entail? After all, in a massively complex world such as ours, many of our actions

constitute such a contribution. And sometimes, these infinitesimal contributions will have to be weighed against meaningful contributions to other causes. The normative terrain is still very tricky, even if we move past the initial puzzle of individual action and collective harms.¹

In this paper, we have several goals, but the main one is to make the case for precisely this move: we want to make the case for going beyond the traditional puzzle of individual action and for instead doing ‘Contributory Ethics’. This is what we call the subset of ethics questions demarcated by the property discussed so far – the fact that whatever individual action is under investigation constitutes an infinitesimal contribution to some massive collective harm.

Importantly, this won’t involve a complete *solution* to that philosophical puzzle. We won’t, here, pretend to offer a knock-down argument showing that one way (or no way) of arguing for individual obligations works. Instead, we will suggest that there is another way of looking at the puzzle that makes it less, well, puzzling. In short: we’ll argue that if we give up on the idea of vindicating an *obligation* to refrain from contributing to collective harms, and instead look to understand why we have *reason* to so refrain, then we can understand the force of both sides of the debate.

Recognizing that we are left only with reasons, however, makes clear the normative messiness of our situation. No strict, deontic requirement will tell us what to do in contributory ethics cases. We therefore spend the final sections of the paper exploring what sorts of action-guiding strategies we might find helpful within this domain.

The Causal Impotence Objection

Although there are a variety of forms made in the literature, the basic idea motivating the criticism of individual obligation is that, on a planetary scale, our contributions to things like GHG emissions, fresh water shortage, land-use shortage, and biodiversity loss are so small as to be meaningless. In short: although our individual actions make a technical difference to the relevant outcomes, it’s a difference that doesn’t matter. Call this the Causal Impotence Objection.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong makes a version of this argument that has become especially influential. He argues that the scale and complexity of climate change entail that none of our normal explanations of obligations can explain the existence of an obligation not to engage in individual emitting practices (W. Sinnott-Armstrong, 2005). In the years since that publication, others have complicated the initial view, including Mark Budolfson, who takes issue with the simplicity of Sinnott-Armstrong’s claims, but ultimately agrees with his conclusion.²

Although the details differ somewhat depending on the author, the basic puzzle of individual emissions ethics goes like this. The harms of climate change occur when hundreds of billions of tons of GHG are emitted too quickly for the earth to incorporate those emissions into the carbon cycle without violent disruption. Individuals, however, emit mere tons of GHG over the course of years or decades. Even in America, where luxury emissions abound, the average citizen emits less than 20 metric tons of CO₂ annually.³ Most individual actions, then, result in mere fractions of a single ton. Refraining from emitting saves so little emissions that my refraining, by itself, will do nothing at all to prevent the harms of climate change. Any harmful consequence of accumulated GHG in the atmosphere will occur whether my few ounces or pounds of CO₂ are present. Heat

waves, hurricanes, rising sea levels, etc., are simply not operating at the scale where they are sensitive to individual human emissions.

It is not only the scale that causes trouble for reasoning about individual responsibility. The complexity of the planetary system is nearly impossible to comprehend. The atmosphere and GHG concentration is not like a bathtub that is full of water, where each additional drop of water causes a drop of overflow. Instead, the atmosphere is one part of a multi-layer carbon cycle in which carbon moves from one layer to another probabilistically, and on vastly different timescales, depending on the layer. When carbon is liberated from fossil fuels, for instance, it may either find its way into the ocean or swamp (a natural carbon sink), or it may stay in the atmosphere for anywhere from decades to tens of millennia. Even if it finds its way into a sink, however, it is not thereby returned to its prior form; the movement from atmospheric carbon back to sediment or rock takes hundreds of thousands to millions of years, during which it may flow back and forth between different layers (Hale, 2011). This vastly complex system defies simple causal stories. By sheer chance, perhaps my emissions will all end up in natural carbon sinks within decades, while every single molecule of GHG from the vegan environmentalist living off the grid goes straight into the atmosphere and stays there for tens of thousands of years. In such an outcome, the environmentalist's few carbon molecules would actually contribute (infinitesimally) to some massive harm, while my luxury emissions from joyguzzling are embedded in a less volatile layer of the carbon cycle for the relevant time frame.

We will not belabor the point. Moral obligations to reduce one's emissions are difficult to explain, since each of us produces a truly minuscule amount of GHG, which then is taken up by a phenomenally complex and unpredictable system. Climate change is harmful only because billions of individuals are acting in an uncoordinated way, via a global system that encourages consumption and production. Most individual changes in that context have no meaningful impact on the outcome.

The skeptic, therefore, claims that we have no obligation to reduce our emitting behavior. And a version of this argument can be run with any massive, complex system that results in harm, including making individual purchases that contribute to harmful practices within a global economy, consuming factory-farmed meat, and likely many other examples. The complex, global society of the twenty-first century makes all of us regular (minuscule) contributors to various, massive harms, but the Causal Impotence Objection suggests that we have no obligation to refrain from such contributions. For many of us, this is a disconcerting conclusion.

The Arguments: Against Seemingly Bad Things that Seemingly Don't Matter

The relatively straightforward Causal Impotence Objection has spawned a literature in response. It seems that, despite there being a recognizable puzzle, relatively few philosophers are willing to throw in the towel. Instead, there has emerged an entire landscape of possible responses, with predictable infighting among the respondents.

In what follows, we will neither participate in nor attempt to fully recap the ongoing debate. Each of the arguments we present has been criticized by others in the literature, but our goal is not to determine whether one of these views is most defensible. Instead, we want to get a sense of both how hard philosophers are attempting to resist the idea

that individuals lack any moral obligation to reduce their carbon footprint because their individual actions don't matter, and the variety of attempts made.

Moral Mathematics Views

Perhaps the most intuitive response to the Causal Impotence Objection for those of consequentialist sympathies is to deny that the difference one makes doesn't matter. The mistake here, we might say, borrowing language from Derek Parfit, is a mistake of 'moral mathematics' (Parfit, 1984, pp. 37–86). If we do the math right, we'll see that our contributions to large-scale harms like resource shortages really do matter.

Both Alastair Norcross (Norcross, 2004) and Shelly Kagan (Kagan, 2011) have argued for a threshold version of this response. In short, they argue that moral mathematics requires that we remain sensitive to important thresholds of harm, and that each individual action be evaluated in light of the probability that it is the action that triggers a threshold effect.

Both authors use an animal welfare example to make their point. Although meat-eaters sometimes defend their actions of purchasing and consuming animal flesh by pointing out that their individual action is too small to result in a change in the marketplace of raising and killing animals, Norcross and Kagan both try to complicate that reasoning. We may not know, they say, which purchase triggers a new order of chickens by the butcher, but presumably there is one. Perhaps, Kagan says, the threshold is 25 chickens, and each chicken purchase shy of 25 doesn't result in more harm being done. 'But when 25 have been sold this triggers the call to the chicken farm, and 25 more chickens are killed, and another 25 are hatched and raised and tortured' (Kagan, 2011, p. 122).⁴

If this is how a system that causes harm works, then we need to be careful in doing the utility calculus correctly: each chicken purchase has a low probability of causing harm, but the harm that some purchase will cause is quite large. The Norcross/Kagan assumption, then, is that a careful working out of the math will yield a negative expected utility.⁵

If there are threshold effects concerning climate change and other environmental degradation, then the reasoning would proceed similarly. Yes, our individual contributions are miniscule, but they have a low probability of causing a catastrophic threshold effect – some climatic event, water shortage, species extinction, etc. And given the small benefit to ourselves of all sorts of luxury activities, and the extraordinary costs associated with threshold harms, doing the math correctly may well yield the conclusion that we are obligated to refrain for standard consequentialist reasons.

A different but related response based on moral mathematics relies on the concept of 'statistical harm'. John Nolt utilizes this concept in order to argue that individuals have a straightforward obligation to reduce their emissions precisely because our individual emissions do cause harm – it's just that the harm is statistical, rather than the standard form that we are familiar with.

According to Nolt, we can calculate the amount that each person contributes to total emissions. We can then look to see how much harm everyone's summed emissions are doing, and in the context of climate change, this harm is massive – millions and millions of people suffering and dying as a result of aggregate emitting behavior. He then attributes the fraction of total harm to an individual based on that person's fraction of contribution to the aggregate total. And when we do this, Nolt claims, we can see that each of us is

responsible for 1–2 people suffering or dying as a result of our lifetime emissions. (Nolt, 2011). It is thus plausible that we are obligated to reduce our total emissions.

Those who believe that wrong actions must harm somebody are most likely to take one of these sorts of moral mathematics strategies. The seeming problem with emitting activity is that aggregate emissions cause massive harm. So, harm is the right kind of explanation of the action's wrongness – it just needs a bit of theory to figure out how to attribute those harms.

Fair Share and Imperfect Duty

Many philosophers do not, however, think that we must explain the wrongness of individual contributions to harms in terms of those harms. Although consequentialists understandably feel burdened to figure out how seemingly wrong actions make the world worse, those uncommitted to consequentialism have other theoretical tools at their disposal. The first of these tools is unsurprising, given our framing of the previous responses as 'consequentialist', as a prominent anti-consequentialist view is some form of Kantian ethics. Christian Baatz has articulated a view of individual obligation that certainly has Kantian themes, by focusing on fairness and imperfect duty.⁶

According to Baatz, we have the relevant moral tools to understand individual obligation in the context of climate change because global emissions will, if unmitigated, cause catastrophe, and so total emissions must be limited. But this recognition turns the right to emit into a scarce good, subject to rules of just distribution. If emissions rights are justly distributed, then everyone will have a fair share of those rights – that is, given what we know about the global cycle and the atmosphere's ability to absorb GHG, we can determine what would be a fair share of the total emission budget to assign to each individual (Baatz, 2014). For those of us who emit in unsustainable ways, then (i.e. most anyone who would be reading this paper), there is a moral problem with our lifestyles. High, luxury emissions can't be universalized on a planet of more than 7.5 billion people, and so we're taking ourselves to be special – to be an exception to just distributive rules.

Baatz's view then takes on the difficult challenge of determining how we should view the obligations of the world's wealthy (again: us). We emit unsustainably but reducing our emissions to an amount that could be universalized would be incredibly demanding, not least because our very infrastructures are built on the premise of high emissions. His solution, then, is to note that given this background structure, an obligation to reduce one's emissions to an universalizable level isn't reasonable. Instead, what each of us has is an *imperfect duty* to reduce our individual emission levels, because ethics, in this case, cannot specify precisely when the duty is fulfilled. The general obligation that high-emitting individuals have, then, is 'to take already available measures to reduce emissions in their responsibility as far as can reasonably be demanded of them' (Baatz, 2014, p. 15).

Virtue

Another way to move away from the role of one's causal impact on consequences is to refocus away from the morality of an action to an evaluation of the actor. This sort of focus on being rather than doing, agent rather than action, is a property of classical virtue ethics. One answer to the Causal Impotence Objection, then, is to concede that one's

action may not make a meaningful difference, but that a virtuous agent would refrain anyway – that indulgence in luxury emissions, for instance, is incompatible with some particular virtue or virtues.

This is the route that Dale Jamieson takes in his work, arguing that the scale and complexity of climate change require both a rehabilitation of classical virtues, and the introduction of some new ‘Green Virtues’ (Jamieson, 2014). According to Jamieson, classical virtues like temperance already help to explain why high-emissions lifestyles are morally problematic, since these lifestyles involve taking a significant amount of a scarce resource when one can make do with much less. In addition to such classical virtues, though, we also need to recognize Green Virtues that specifically addresses the moral problems of a global society that threatens the environment. This category includes such virtues as mindfulness, cooperativeness, and respect for the future (Jamieson, 2014, pp. 186–193).

Virtue ethics, as is well noted in discussion of its pros and cons, may not render judgments of when some particular action is prohibited or obligatory (Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018, p. 171). Nonetheless, it does tell us what sort of life we ought to live. And what seems plausible is that the virtuous person would have a difficult time justifying many of the luxury emissions pursued by the world’s wealthy.

Integrity

Several philosophers have argued that integrity plays an important role in justifying and motivating behavior that makes infinitesimally small contributions to some moral problem. Trevor Hedberg, Marion Hourdequin, and Bob Fischer all start by considering those who adopt a political commitment to prevent massive harms like climate change or the animal suffering endemic to most forms of animal agriculture. These authors argue that such individuals are subject to an integrity-based obligation to reduce one’s carbon footprint or eschew purchasing animal products that come from unacceptably cruel conditions.⁷ Although the details of these positions are distinct, we take it that they point to a fairly intuitive position.

In short: integrity is a character trait that involves aligning one’s actions with one’s values. Someone who deeply cares about helping the poor, who has plenty of time and money, but who regularly fails to help those suffering from poverty despite having the opportunity, looks to most of us as someone without integrity. Now if we don’t think that valuing charity is a moral requirement, then one way for such a person to regain integrity is to abandon a commitment to helping the poor. In this way, integrity does not seem to supply significant moral content (it provides a conditional: for those who value charity, live up to its demands). However, if the person in our example steadfastly refuses to abandon his ideals, and continues to fail to provide poverty relief, he certainly seems to be lacking integrity.

We tend to think of integrity as a trait or property that is morally relevant. Perhaps, as Hedberg thinks, it is a virtue (Hedberg, 2018). But it is difficult to hear that someone lacks integrity and not take it to be a moral criticism. You ought to have integrity, and so it’s good, or at least better, when one’s actions align with their values.

If this is the right way to think about integrity, then it is precisely the kind of tool that can help explain why one ought to act in a particular way, even if that action doesn’t

matter causally. Integrity provides a conditional, recall, and so if you value climate mitigation efforts, animal rights efforts, etc., then having integrity requires acting in line with those values. And while it could be the case that acting in line with those values means only acting at the collective, or policy level (advocating for reform, for instance), it does seem strange to call oneself an environmentalist and then fail to recycle when it's easy, or driving a Hummer for fun. In such a case, there is conspicuous misalignment between one's commitments and actions.

Of course, because integrity looks to provide conditional requirements, there needs to be one more step. It's not merely that those who value the environment should participate in environmentalist actions; but it's also the case that everyone *should* value the environment. Those who have perfect integrity only because they have terrible values aren't therefore morally righteous; but the failure isn't with their integrity. The failure is with their values. So *once one has the correct values*, integrity claims to explain how high-level commitments translate into normative pressure on individual actions.

Complicity

When considering the problem of individual contribution to collective harms, it is tempting to think that an account of complicity will provide an answer. After all, complicity explains what's wrong with other forms of wrongful participation, and so it feels like the right kind of explanation. However, classic notions of complicity turn on one's intentional participation in a wrongful act (covering for a lying friend, for instance), and so the massive, unintentional, collective harms cases don't fit perfectly. If complicity were to help, then, it would need a different form.

Christopher Kutz argues that complicity can also explain the wrongness of 'quasi-participation', which is the relationship we have to large, unstructured collectives that together cause harm (Kutz, 2000). We quasi-participate in the collective action of causing climate change through our collective emissions, then, because we knowingly and intentionally emit GHG which, when done in concert with billions of other people, causes the harms in question. The wrongness that philosophers are trying to explain in this section can be explained by the fact that this is a form of complicity, and so is wrongful participation in a way that, though not identical, is analogous to the wrongful participation in classic complicity cases.

Put this way, the complicity strategy looks a bit too close to question-begging, explaining the wrongness of individual contributions to harm by calling it wrongful participation in those harms.⁸ But the insight, we believe, for those who think that exploration of complicity can be insightful, is that we already have an explanation for why certain forms of participation in harmful action can be wrong; what is needed, then, is a fuller account of complicity that explains why including some forms of participation is not *ad hoc*.

Non-Superfluous Help

In the same way that we began by noting the consequentialist defense, and then moved on to various defenses that abandon a focus on causal contribution to the harms of climate change, Julia Nefsky similarly divides candidate responses to the Causal

Impotence Objection into categories. On her view, we can identify responses as either denying the description of cases (the acts actually do make a difference) or rejecting the implication that failing to make a difference implies no relevant obligation.⁹ Those of Kagan, Norcross, and Nolt, for instance, deny the description: if we do the math right, small contributions make a difference. The other responses we've canvassed, though, all abandon that effort. Such views concede that individual actions don't meaningfully make a difference to the harms at issue but argue that we can still be obligated to refrain from them.

Interestingly, Nefsky argues that neither category of responses work, but that we can still explain why we sometimes shouldn't contribute to collective harms. Her view sort of splits the difference between the two categories: in short, she suggests that through our individual actions, we can non-superfluously help a cause without making a difference. Basically, this can be true if your doing something is the kind of thing that, should not enough people do it, will cause harm. So if some collective action is a great good, and it's uncertain whether it will come about, the question to you is whether your contribution could be part of what brings it about (Nefsky, 2017). And while Nefsky does not expressly argue for an obligation to non-superfluously help prevent massive harms, she indicates that she thinks that individuals *do* have something like an imperfect obligation to do so.¹⁰

Nefsky's language of non-superfluous help, or contribution, to a cause seems worth highlighting. Just as Kutz highlights complicity as a tool for helping to explain morally relevant participation, Nefsky seems to be trying to explain morally relevant contribution. These views, whether one takes them as insightful, successful, or not, helpfully make clear what the challenge really is here. In short: if we aren't attracted to moral mathematics (or 'denying the description') views, then what needs explaining is how non-causal contribution to some collective harm or benefit can *matter*.

Why Fight so Hard for a Mysterious Obligation?

One of the reasons it's helpful to see the extensive (and non-exhaustive) list of strategies that philosophers have employed in this debate is to understand how difficult it is to give up the intuition that one can do wrong by infinitesimally contributing to a collective harm. If the Causal Impotence Objection is so convincing, we could just do the philosophical thing and accept it, modifying our pre-reflective intuitions. That is, after all, an occupational hazard of doing moral philosophy.

So why have so many philosophers worked so hard to explain this seemingly mysterious obligation? Our suggestion is that it is really hard to believe that there is *nothing wrong* with being part of a morally terrible outcome. And this is important to point out, because it helps to identify a path forward: if we can explain how there is *something* wrong with individual contributions to harms, without needing to explain the purported *obligation* not to so contribute, then we can salvage the motivating intuition without refuting the Causal Impotence Objection. Or so we shall argue in the remaining sections.

Why, then, is it so hard to accept that someone can do no wrong by contributing to massive collective harms like climate change? We take it that there are at least two, really powerful intuitions at play. If the Causal Impotence Objection goes through, then it may look like we're stuck endorsing the claims that: (1) *There is nothing wrong with the most*

unmotivated participation in morally terrible systems; and (2) no individual ought to do the thing that all of us morally ought to do.

If there's nothing wrong with our individual contributions to massive problems, then, *contra* any environmentalist bone in our bodies, there is nothing wrong with walking right by the recycling bin – recyclable waste in hand – and dropping it in the landfill bin.¹¹ Similarly, it is permissible to leave on every light in the house even when away from home, eat steak every night, fly across the Atlantic for the sake of a nice meal, and joy-ride in one's Hummer for pleasure. But to many of us, these actions seem seriously morally problematic. And we think we're saying something true when we teach children that they *ought* to recycle. As it becomes easier to do, many of us even feel like we ought to recycle *and* compost, despite the slight extra difficulty. What is very difficult to believe is that someone could intentionally act in thoroughly, systematically wasteful ways and rightly claim that there is *no moral problem with doing so* because her individual actions don't matter.

At a more game-theoretic level, we would be committed to the view that there are no instances where the existence of a collective obligation has a moral impact on individual choices. For instance: we take it as a given that the auto industry should move away from internal combustion engines (ICE) in their cars, in favor of electric cars that can be powered by the scale-up of renewable electricity. But the Causal Impotence Objection claims that no one of us thereby has an obligation to forego ICE cars in favor of newer, battery-powered technology, nor do any of us have an obligation to forego cheap, dirty electricity in favor of more expensive renewable energy. *No one ought* to buy electric cars, even though *we ought* to replace ICE cars with electric cars.

These implications are, for many of us, very hard to swallow. It seems obvious that I ought to recycle when it's easy, that I ought to turn off the lights before I leave my home for a week, and although less obvious that anyone ought to buy an electric car, it's hard to believe that there is no moral difference between buying a Hummer and a Tesla.

These intuitions are strong enough that the puzzle of individual contributions to collective harms may feel a bit like we're in the old joke, asking about our judgments, 'Sure, they work in practice; but do they work in theory?'

However, the strongest version of the intuitions that our individual actions matter does not entail that the Causal Impotence Objection fails. The Causal Impotence Objection is plausible precisely because it focuses on *obligation*, and obligations are strict, which makes them hard to come by. One philosophical project, then, is the one engaged in by many of the authors we've cited already, which is trying to prove the existence of these difficult-to-justify obligations not to make infinitesimal contributions to some massive harm.

The powerful intuitions in this section, however, do not require the existence of any obligation in order for them to be vindicated. There could well be *something* wrong with the most flagrant wastefulness, and it could be that some people should invest in new, clean technology, even in the absence of any obligation not to contribute to collective harms. If correct, we could move past the very difficult debate concerning whether the Causal Impotence Objection can be defeated and move on to figuring out what we ought to do, *even if the objection goes through*. Rather than solving the puzzle of individual obligation, then, this strategy sidesteps it, and asks what we can learn about individual ethics in the domain of collective harms without a solution. We turn to this task now.

Abandoning Obligation

Although moral philosophers love to talk about obligation, this is clearly not the only moral category that matters. Judgments of character matter significantly to our moral lives, even when they come apart from judgments of obligations; our reactive attitudes matter; moral reasons matter, and those reasons may add up to other interesting normative concepts like ‘oughts’, even without adding up to an obligation.¹² In other words, we often forget that there is a rich moral landscape that can make sense of our moral experience even when it seems inappropriate to invoke obligation. On our view, it is overwhelmingly plausible that there are reasons for many of us not to contribute to collective harms (much of the time), and that these reasons can explain the ways in which particular actions seem morally problematic, but without invoking obligation. In short: reasons come cheap (or at least, much cheaper than obligation), but do real work in explaining our moral experience. Others have accepted that there are such reasons.¹³ Some who have accepted this point, however, note that there are such reasons in the context of arguments that primarily address whether individuals have moral obligations – where the question of obligation is taken to be the truly important issue.¹⁴ For instance, when defending Sinnott-Armstrong’s original articulation of the Causal Impotence Objection, Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong write,

Crucially, our thesis is *only about moral requirements*. We do not deny that it is morally better, best, ideal, or virtuous to refrain from joyguzzling. We also do not deny that there is a *pro tanto* moral reason to refrain from joyguzzling, assuming that not all reasons are requirements ... Moral requirements differ from other moral reasons in which kinds of reactions are appropriate. Someone who violates a moral requirement without any adequate justification or excuse thereby does something morally wrong and becomes liable to some negative sanction (including moral condemnation, anger, or guilt). Nonetheless, someone who conforms to a moral requirement does not always deserve a reward (such as praise) (Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018, p. 170, emphasis added).

Rather than treating the existence of such reasons as something of an aside, however, we think that the existence of such reasons suggests a new research program for work in applied ethics.

For the purposes of this paper, we take a reason to be a consideration that counts in favor of or against an action, but we do not take a stand on the many hotly debated topics within theories of reasons. Whether one is a realist, a Humean, a Kantian constructivist, or whatever, the reasons that are relevant to this discussion seem plausible. In general, when looking for reasons, we look for facts that bear a normative relation to us – the ‘count in favor of’ or ‘count against’ relation.

So how do we know whether there is reason not to contribute to massive collective harms? Well, we look to see whether there are considerations that plausibly favor not so contributing. Different people will want to highlight different candidate reasons, and one possible exercise would be to look at all of the defenders of individual obligation and ask whether – question of obligation aside – their accounts point to plausible reasons. If one’s individual emissions constitute (very small) causal contributions, due to thresholds for instance, does that constitute a reason not to act? Or do considerations of fairness constitute a reason not to act? Integrity? If all or most of the arguments identify plausible reasons not to contribute to collective harms, then even in the absence of obligation, we

might start to think there is a collection of fairly important reasons not to contribute to collective harms.

We will not perform that exhaustive analysis here, though. Doing it well would be another project, and the aim of this paper is to show that there is at least sometimes, *some* plausible reason not to contribute to collective harms – not that everyone in the literature is correctly identifying a particular reason. On our view, the most plausible explanation for such a reason is to be found in exploring the concept of ‘contribution’ that came up earlier.

Among those defenders of individual obligation who didn’t focus on causal contribution, many wanted to identify the seeming wrongness of not doing one’s part, or not participating in the effort to avoid certain harms. And this certainly seems to be getting at a common intuition: the problem of flagrantly and needlessly contributing to some massive problem is that one is not chipping in to help address a necessary moral project. We teach our children that they must make the same effort as others to solve collective problems, and that it’s not okay to make an exception of oneself. Further, mere contribution to a collective harm can make us feel morally dirty, as if we’ve been corrupted somehow.

In short, we seem to take the fact that some activity is what, when a sufficient number of others do it, causes collective harm, as a reason not to do it. Contribution itself, even when not causally efficacious, has (dis-)value for us, though that (dis-)value can be grounded differently for different individuals and on different views. Those concerned with integrity, for instance, take there to be value in living up to one’s broad political commitments, where living up to such commitments will involve not contributing to a massive problem. Those who believe there is an independent justification for certain virtues (such as temperance or mindfulness) may well see certain forms of contribution as vicious. More broadly: we take our actions to *mean* something – to be relevant to our identities and to have certain expressive value.¹⁵ Constituting myself as an environmentalist and then intentionally contributing to environmentally destructive actions when I could avoid them is both privately problematic for my identity constitution, and publicly problematic for the expressive value of participating in an effort or a movement. That an action expresses support for a morally required change (like abandoning fossil fuels) seems to count in favor of doing it, and that its opposite requires contributing to the global system causing massive harm, and so being part of that collective, seems to count against it.

There are three things to note immediately about this sort of maneuver. First, the move from trying to defend obligation to pointing out the likely existence of reasons helps, we think, to explain our conflicting intuitions about individual contributions to collective harms. Yes, there is something wrong with the most flagrant emitting of luxury GHG, or with throwing recyclables in the trash when the recycle bin is right there: doing so is insensitive to real reasons, and so we’re not left in the morally uncomfortable position of saying that such actions aren’t criticizable. Someone who flagrantly contributes to environmental problems without good reason is wasteful, fails to express solidarity with morally required political movements, acts in accordance with vicious character traits, etc.

She does not, however, straightforwardly violate an obligation – at least as far as we know. And this explains both the difficulty of refuting the Causal Impotence Objection, and our own reactions. If we knew that John Nolt was right, for instance, and our emitting

lifestyle had the moral seriousness of killing or seriously harming 1–2 future people, then our reactive attitudes and relationships with all wealthy emitters ought to be very different than it is. In other words: yes, there seems to be something wrong with callously contributing to collective harms; but it seems different from violations of strict obligation. The idea that we have reasons not to so participate, and that those reasons add up to more and less weighty total considerations in different circumstances, seems to get the moral phenomenology right.

Second, some philosophers won't be convinced, as they will want to know *why* participation in collectives can be reason-giving. Because the answer to this question will vary depending on one's preferred account of reasons, it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address it. For instance, a realist like Scanlon (Scanlon, 1998) or Parfit (Parfit, 2011), will hold that reasons are unanalyzable, irreducible normative facts, and so contributory reasons simply are or aren't part of the normative fabric of the world. A Humean like Mark Schroeder (Schroeder, 2008) will look for internal states like desires (we desire coherence in our identity, for instance) to explain how certain considerations gain normative force. And so on. It's possible that whether we have reasons not to contribute to massive collective harms depends on whether a particular theory of reasons is true; but we doubt it. For the most part, all theories of reasons are trying to account for the same phenomena, which is to say that they tend to agree about which reasons exist. So, we think that the intuitive plausibility of contributory reasons means that theories of reasons should aim to be able to explain them. If it turns out that any one particular theory has a hard time accounting for contributory reasons, then just as is the case for other *desiderata*, that should count against the theory.¹⁶

The third point is that, because reasons come cheap, nothing we've said here tells us what we ought to do in any case. Individuals constantly have reasons to do things that they end up having most reason not to do, because these reasons are outweighed. So, the mere fact that we have reason not to contribute to collective harms doesn't prove that there's ever a single case where what we ought to do, all things considered, is avoid contribution to some particular, collective harm. Which leaves us in a very complicated spot, since we need action guidance.

The Phenomenal Moral Complexity of Contributory Ethics

The challenge, at this point, is that the very 'cheapness' of reasons cited earlier means that, in a complex, global society like ours, individuals will be constantly bombarded by an incomprehensible number of reasons. Every aspect of our lives – especially in wealthy nations – involves GHG emissions, participating in global supply chains that can be better or worse, expressing solidarity (or failing to so express it) with many causes, and so on. Our choices of career, where to live, where to shop, what to eat, how to enjoy our free time, how many children to have, how to raise them, and a million other things are all choices subject to what we can call 'contributory reasons', which count against or in favor of contributing to collective harms or benefits.

Practically, then, how can we possibly move forward in a justifiable way? The computations involved in actually responding to the reasons relevant to each of our choices would be unmanageable and would result in paralysis. Analogous to the criticism of act-

utilitarianism: we simply can't operate on the basis of performing phenomenally complex practical deliberation for every choice in our lives.

Given that we should respond to contributory reasons, we need some new tools of practical deliberation. Tracking how utilitarians often try to solve their own version of the problem, then: what we need are general heuristics that can help us act on the balance of reasons more reliably than trying to calculate the justifiability of each individual action (Railton, 1984). Or, drawing on Joseph Raz's work in legal philosophy, we need to formulate rules that, when treated as authoritative, better enable us to do what we have most reason to do than if we were to directly deliberate about what we have most reason to do.¹⁷ We can call these rules – which we need in order to navigate our contributory reasons within today's world – the Rules for Contributory Ethics, or 'Contributory Rules'.

Pointing out the need for such rules is, for the most part, the conclusion that we want to endorse in this paper: the central task for contributory ethics is not to account for our obligations but to provide Contributory Rules.

Providing a complete set of such tools is another project, and an intimidating undertaking. But it's one that we think is called for, because this is the kind of guidance we need in the present world.¹⁸ And although we will not here provide the complete toolkit of heuristics needed, we will close by making a few comments about these tools, and then acknowledging some of the challenges that will arise when formulating them.

As noted already, Contributory Rules are heuristics or rules of thumb, and a Contributory Rule is a good one just insofar as it better enables us to act in accord with what we have most reason to do than if we were to directly deliberate about what we have most reason to do. This standard for Contributory Rules warrants two important observations. First, what heuristics best enable us to act in accord with what we have most reason to do will be sensitive to our circumstances as imperfect practical reasoners confronting a complex world. To illustrate with an example, imagine a Contributory Rule that will better enable people to act on their reasons only if they have a PhD in environmental science, or if they can engage in extremely complicated means-end reasoning. Such a Contributory Rule will not be a good one insofar as it will not better enable almost anyone to act in accord with what they have most reason to do. What this example suggests is that as Contributory Rules become more complex, they will be that much less useful as Contributory Rules – although this need to eschew complexity leads to other difficulties, which we discuss below.

Second, once we recognize that Contributory Rules are tools to help us navigate our reasons, we can better see the difference between Contributory Ethics and the previously discussed attempts to answer the Causal Impotence Objection. When attempting to demonstrate that individuals have a moral obligation to refrain from needlessly consuming fossil fuels, one is attempting to discover a *true* claim about the moral landscape. When attempting to develop Contributory Rules, on the other hand, the task is to develop a tool that will be *useful* for us given our reasons, their complexity, and our limitations as practical reasoners.¹⁹

To make this discussion more concrete, we will consider some potential Contributory Rules. Despite the important difference between obligations and Contributory Rules, when trying to develop Contributory Rules it makes good sense to begin by considering candidate attempts to vindicate the existence of an obligation not to contribute to

massive harms – attempts that we surveyed in response to the Causal Impotence Objection. It makes good sense to consider these attempts insofar as we have noted that these attempts call attention to different sorts of reasons that we have, reasons to refrain from contributing to massive harms. Moreover, the starting sense of some philosophers that we have something as strong as an *obligation* not to contribute to certain collective harms pushes us toward an idea of fairly restrictive candidate rules. For instance: the threats of climate change are now so serious, and the need for mitigation so desperate, that perhaps we think we need to do something radical, like ‘minimize our participation in emitting activities’. Or upon finding out that a certain favored chocolate brand employs slave labor somewhere in its supply chain or that a preferred sneaker company relies on sweatshop labor, perhaps we think we ought to eliminate that product from our lives.

On the one hand, these ideas are sensible. But considering them for very long raises serious challenges. While some emitting activities are easy to give up, really pursuing minimization would require significant time, effort, and resources. Those of us who can afford it may feel the need to spend tens of thousands of dollars on solar panels, purchase an expensive electric car that can run off that green energy, devote ourselves to researching the most sustainable diet, and so on. And while that may sound admirable, note what the opportunity costs of doing something like this are: the money alone could save hundreds of lives if redirected toward efficient organizations that provide humanitarian support. Or, even within the confines of environmental ideals, it is not at all clear that minimizing my own impact on the environment (at great cost) is more effective than supporting a politician in a close race who will promote environmentalist projects, or contributing to an NGO that can merge my resources with those of others to take on larger-scale efforts.

On the chocolate front, refusing to buy the slave-supporting brand also seems like a commendable practice, but it too raises questions. If it’s followed up with switching to another brand, then we might wonder how the buyer knows that the new chocolate doesn’t employ slave labor. Ought they to find out? If so, then they probably ought to check into all of their purchases to see what kind of ideals they are supporting with their dollars. But corporations being what they are, such a diligent person is likely to find many values she doesn’t want to support, and so needing to switch and research ever more. Now again, we are in a position where taking this sort of intuitive idea to its logical end would require huge amounts of time and energy, and potentially money, if (as seems likely) more ethically produced products are more expensive.

To return to the case of sneakers produced in a sweatshop, even if the labor conditions are exploitative, it might be that the workers are better off than they would be if the relevant work were not available. This leads to complicated questions about how to describe the collective harm and what reasons not to contribute to them actually entail. Some might claim that contributing to the demise of sweatshops, without also acting in ways to ensure that those employed by the sweatshop have better options than working in a sweatshop, constitutes contributing to a harm by putting those individuals out of work.²⁰ Perhaps a better use of time, energy, and money would involve donating to organizations that would promote viable alternatives to sweatshop labor for those who currently choose to work in sweatshops.²¹

In short, we might have started out with an inclination that a good rule would push us to minimize our participation in problematic practices of various kinds. But there are other, competing rules, that would have us direct our efforts toward being as effective as possible. On this side of the debate is the intuition that contributory reasons are weaker than reasons that connect more directly to harms and benefits. So, if you can respond to reasons to rescue those in need (by donating, say, to OXFAM) at the expense of violating only contributory reasons, you should.

A first pass at two candidate Contributory Rules, then, is as follows:

- (1) *Make a Difference*: When contributory reasons conflict with reasons to act in causally efficacious ways, the latter should be assigned greater weight than the former.
- (2) *Clean Hands*: There is always a contributory reason to minimize your participation in collective harms, focusing on the most egregious harms first.²²

We include these rules, in large part, to illustrate a bit of how thinking about contributory ethics might go, as well as to highlight how important it is to do this work. On our view, both *Make a Difference* and *Clean Hands* are plausible on their faces, but obviously, they can come into conflict. Minimizing contributions to collective harms can, as in the cases discussed, lead to being less efficacious in bringing about benefit or avoiding harms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two candidate Contributory Rules replicate, in a way, a classic debate between act consequentialists and non-consequentialists within the contributory framework. The Clean Hands rule prioritizes removing oneself from the collectively harmful practice in the same way that a Kantian or natural law theorist may claim that one must follow a rule, even if doing so is sub-optimal. And this replication of such a large debate explains why we cannot, in the closing section of a single paper, settle on what sorts of Contributory Rules we should endorse.

We can, however, note that there is plenty of room for other Contributory Rules that do not require settling the debate between keeping one's hands clean and being as effective as possible. Because often, we can decide whether to contribute to some collective harm (or benefit) without facing a serious trade-off in terms of effectiveness. Taking a round-trip flight across the Atlantic Ocean to eat a steak dinner has a large carbon footprint, but it is easy to forego this luxury, and the environmental expense of the trip constitutes a reason not to take it. If a wealthy person decides on these grounds not to take this trip, it appears she responded appropriately to a reason that didn't face a lot of opposition, and that's the hallmark of a justifiable decision – she acted on the balance of reasons. That's true regardless of whether she then decides the best use of her resources is to make all of her purchasing coherently reflect her values.

We can thus imagine the candidate Contributory Rule *Easy Integrity*, which tells us to respond to fairly uncontested contributory reasons when doing so is particularly easy. *Easy Integrity* not only explains the normative pull to not take a Transatlantic flight to eat a steak dinner but also the starting intuition concerning recycling – you should not walk past the recycling bin and toss an aluminum can in the garbage.²³

Finally, while we have focused on Contributory Rules, it is also worth emphasizing that Contributory Ethics can also accommodate 'better and worse' judgments about people's actions and lifestyle choices. If someone is going to buy and take joyrides in a fancy car, he

does better by choosing a Tesla than a Hummer. Both run counter to at least some contributory reasons since joyriding is, collectively, environmentally harmful; but buying a Tesla responds to the suite of contributory reasons favoring clean energy, while buying the Hummer is among the most flagrant ways to violate the reason not to participate in collective environmental harms, given its incredible inefficiency.²⁴ It's hard to imagine that buying a Tesla for one's family car could be obligatory or even strongly recommended (given its status as luxury); however, we *do* need people to buy into the future infrastructure that we collectively must bring about, and so there is something good about the Tesla purchase that is not good in other luxury purchases.

Conclusion

Before concluding, it is worth pausing to situate our proposal relative to the work of others we have discussed. The existing responses to the Causal Impotence Objection and our work all address what individuals should do in the face of massive harms. Yet we have articulated two important divisions that inform these responses. The first division concerns the relevant normative concept. Many of the responses to the Causal Impotence Objection have focused on whether one has an *obligation* not to contribute to the relevant massive harms. We pointed out, however, that obligations are not the only game in town. Even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that individuals lack obligations to refrain from contributing to massive harms, we defended the claim that they have *reasons* to refrain from doing so.

We noted that this point about reasons sometimes gets acknowledged in passing during debates about whether one has obligations to, say, maintain a low carbon footprint. The significance of these reasons turns, at least in part, on the project one undertakes in response to the Causal Impotence Objection. One kind of project focuses on discovering true features about the moral landscape. And this is the kind of debate that has animated much of the response to the Causal Impotence Objection; philosophers attempt to figure out what obligations or reasons we have. Yet we have suggested that moving the focus from obligations to reasons points to the importance of a distinct project: the development of deliberative tools, such as Contributory Rules, that enable agents to navigate the vast and complex array of reasons they have. In the following table, we map out the literature discussed here along the two axes just described: whether an author focuses on obligations or reasons; and whether they aim to discover features of the moral landscape or to develop tools for practical deliberation. Although there may be disagreement concerning where to place certain authors, our goal is to make clear the novelty of our current project, as the other authors with whom we have engaged are largely engaged in a landscaping project; and Lawford-Smith, who we think may share our aim of deliberative tool development, differs in her focus on obligations.

	Projects that aim to discover features of the moral landscape	Projects that aim to develop tools for practical deliberation
Obligations	Fischer; Nolt; Nefsky; Baatz; Hedberg; Hourdequin; Kutz; Maybe: Lawford-Smith; Schwenkenbecher	Maybe: Lawford-Smith
Reasons	Jamieson (virtues/reasons); Kagan; Norcross; Nefsky	This paper

By now, it should be clear that the space of contributory ethics is rich, and that much work needs to be done. If – as we claim – contributory reasons exist, and if they explain some of the intuitive pull away from contributing to collective harms, or toward contributing to collective benefits, then we must develop new deliberative tools for this very different normative situation. We have pointed in a few directions that might be relevant, but a sustained investigation of what we have called the Rules of Contributory Ethics will be a large endeavor; for much of individual ethics in our modern society requires thinking about our actions both as causal influences on the world, and as forms of contribution to systems that are so large and complex as to be insensitive to our individual action.

Notes

1. For some discussion of this point, see esp., (Lawford-Smith, 2016).
2. Budolfson discusses various versions of the Causal Impotence Objection to varying degrees in multiple publications, including his doctoral dissertation (Budolfson, 2012), a book chapter on the harm footprint of veganism (Budolfson, 2016), an article on utilitarianism's specific response to the Causal Impotence Objection (Budolfson, 2019), and a as-yet unpublished manuscript that makes his core argument most directly (Budolfson, Manuscript).
3. Data on per capita emissions, both globally and by country, are reported by the World Bank. Information can be accessed here: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/en.atm.co2e.pc>. As of 2014, annual emissions of the average US citizen appear to have fallen from a high of more than 22 metric tons in the 1970s, to around 16.
4. For another consequentialist response to the Causal Impotence Objection that invokes triggering thresholds, see (Hedden, 2020).
5. Kagan and Norcross do not expressly say that such actions violate an obligation – for instance, Kagan writes that consequentialism 'condemns' acts that might 'trigger' massive harms (Kagan, 2011, p. 140). Norcross also uses the language of 'condemnation' (Norcross, 2004, p. 231). This might be in part because they are somewhat hesitant to employ deontic notions like 'obligation'. Norcross, after all, defends a version of scalar consequentialism, which does not treat obligation as an intrinsically important deontic category. See, e.g. (Norcross, 1997) (Norcross, 2006).
6. For another discussion somewhat along these lines, see esp. (Johnson, 2003).
7. Hedberg argues for the conclusion that 'individuals have a prima facie obligation to reduce their individual GHG emissions, unless they are already doing all that they can be reasonably be expected to do to reduce the impacts of climate change,' (Hedberg, 2018, p. 67). Hourdequin writes, 'The kind of unity that integrity recommends requires that an individual work to harmonize her commitments at various levels and achieve a life in which her commitments are embodied not only in a single sphere, but in the various spheres she inhabits,' (Hourdequin, 2010, p. 449). Fischer devotes his book to exploring different attempts to ground obligations to go vegan (Fischer, 2020). In Chapter 9, he settles on the view that if one adopts a practical identity as an animal activist, then one acquires something like an obligation to go vegan – and this is the best or perhaps only way to account for an obligation to be vegan. For another integrity view, albeit one less concerned with obligation, see esp., (Boey, 2016).
8. I take it that this is close to the criticism that Colin Hickey makes of Kutz's move here, when he says that arguments like this merely 'slap a label of complicity' onto participation in a collective harm (Hickey, 2017, p. 51).
9. Nefsky explores this terrain across multiple publications: (Nefsky, Consequentialism and the Problem of Collective Harm: A Reply to Kagan, 2011), (Nefsky, 2015), (Nefsky, 2017).

10. For instance, Nefsky writes, 'My own view is that in such cases, the fact that individual acts of the relevant sort can help to change the outcome, but that the outcome will not (or is very unlikely to) turn on any individual one of them, yields – to borrow a term from Kant – an "imperfect" obligation to act in the relevant way' (Nefsky, 2017, p. 2765).
11. One complication for this example arises because as of this writing, China is no longer accepting recycling from the United States, and so there is energized skepticism regarding whether recycled waste will, in fact, be recycled. For the sake of this example, we ignore this complication, as this is not, presumably, an insurmountable challenge. If any reader is skeptical that recycling is a particularly good example, we offer several others in the following sentence. Our point is that: even if there are objections to any particular example of a contributory action, there are plenty of others to choose from. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
12. Although we do not intend our view to require a particular normative ontology, we endorse the following claims (on which many formalized views could agree): 1. A reason is a consideration that counts in favor of something; 2. When reasons stack up in some way – perhaps that there is weightiest reason, or overriding reason, to do some particular thing – then they entail that one ought to do that thing; and 3. That one has reason to do, or ought to do, a thing does not imply that one is obligated to do so, as an obligation is a strict requirement (which likely entails that others have standing to demand, and that various reactive attitudes are justified).
13. While Nefsky ultimately gestures toward her view that individuals have various imperfect obligations, she primarily focuses on reasons – writing, 'my focus in this paper is on the question of how there can be reason to act in the relevant ways in collective impact cases, when it looks as though doing so won't make a difference. Often, though, discussions of these cases have focused on the stronger question: is there a moral obligation to act in these ways' (Nefsky, 2017, p. 2744)?
14. See, e.g. (Fischer, 2020) (Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018) (Schwenkenbecher, 2014).
15. One complication for this claim about expressive value comes from Ewan Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong in (Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018, p. 184). They argue that consuming fossil fuels for fun by joyriding ('joyguzzling') could be a way of signaling how institutional solutions rather than individual ones are ultimately needed – and therefore, there is not an obligation not to joyguzzle. In reply, there are a few points worth making. First, we are not claiming that there is an obligation to refrain from the relevant activities – merely that there are reasons, so, on its own, this point from Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong does not undercut our claim. Second, there are reasons to doubt that such activities will, in fact, have the relevant expressive function in many contexts, as there are reasons to think others will fail to interpret such activities in the intended way. But third, if joyguzzling did call attention to the need for institutional solutions to problems like climate change, then perhaps there could be reasons to engage in it. Nonetheless, the reason to act in this way with the relevant expressive function would be one reason among many – and, on their own, such reasons in favor of joyguzzling would not be decisive. And we take this to highlight the need for more work in contributory ethics (which we begin in the sections below); we need more rules of thumb or other deliberative strategies to help determine what we have most reason to do – whether that is to make a small contribution to raising awareness of the need for institutional solutions, or to refrain from making a harmful contribution to a massive system. We thank an anonymous referee for bringing this point to our attention.
16. In other words: we predict that these different accounts of reasons converge in supporting the claim that we have contributory reasons. The main difficulty for this prediction would arise for those with broadly Humean sympathies, according to which one's reasons for action are closely tied to our desires. Perhaps some Humeans would claim that if someone were truly indifferent to the collectively bad outcomes we have discussed, then that person does not have reasons to refrain from, say, leaving all the lights on. Yet we do not take this claim to be a challenge to our argument. The causal impotence objection does not derive its force from indifference to massive, collective harms; it derives its force

from each individual's inability to make a meaningful difference to massive, collective harms. Accordingly, arguments that rest on motivational indifference will only show that individuals indifferent to massive collective harms lack the relevant reasons. And, if the argument in this paper only applies to those who care about the badness of the relevant massive problems, then we do not see this as a shortcoming of the argument; our aim is not to demonstrate that the skeptic or the amoralist has the relevant contributory reasons.

17. See (Raz, 1986), (Raz, 2006). Some might point out that Raz appears to intend to proffer his view about conditions under which we are obligated to comply with law. Yet as others have pointed out, Raz's view seems better-suited to explaining when we are *permitted* to treat law as authoritative. For this point, see esp. (Hershovitz, 2011), (Perry, 2013).
18. Noting that it's the structure of today's world that raises these questions also hints at an explanation for why this project seems so difficult. Humans have, for most of their existence, lived in a wildly different context from that in which we find ourselves. The problems of a global society of billions of people raises fundamentally different ethical issues than did the smaller societies in which humans developed. It is thus not surprising that the moral tools developed do not fair well in solving the problems of contributory ethics: they didn't, after all, evolve to do so. For a similar observation, see, e.g. (Jameison & Di Paolo, 2016), (Lichtenberg, 2010), (Parfit, 1984).
19. Admittedly, there are some views that claim that what our moral obligations are should be sensitive to our limitations as practical reasoners. For example, Brad Hooker argues that the rules we are morally *obligated* to follow will be quite responsive to our motivational and epistemic limitations. See (Hooker, 2000). So, for someone like Hooker, the task of developing Contributory Rules would not be terribly different from giving a theory of our moral obligations.
20. For an articulation of this claim, see, e.g. (Zwolinski, 2007). A distinct debate about ethically motivated boycotts focuses on whether such boycotts violate procedural requirements of liberal democracies – see (Waheed, 2012). For objections to the claim that ethically motivated boycotts violate procedural requirements of liberal democracy, see especially (Barry & Macdonald, 2019).
21. For a somewhat similar argument considered in defense of this conclusion, see esp. (Lichtenberg, 2010, pp. 564–565).
22. Lawford-Smith articulates a very similar principle, entitled 'Minimize Injustice,' although she appears to treat it as a *prima facie* duty rather than a contributory rule. See (Lawford-Smith, 2016, pp. esp. 139–140).
23. The verdicts about these examples might seem obvious, and they eschew the complexities involved in, say, the global supply chains discussed above. Nonetheless, these examples substantiate the claim that sometimes our reasons will obviously and decisively count against certain conduct that appears not to make a meaningful difference – regardless of whether there is an adequate reply to the Causal Impotence Objection. That is, we can grant that the person who takes a roundtrip Transatlantic flight to eat a steak dinner, then throws her aluminum can in the trash all while leaving her lights on has no *obligation* to refrain from the relevant conduct. Nonetheless, granting that she lacks this obligation hardly precludes the judgment that, all things considered, that person should not engage in that behavior.
24. Of course, we could imagine details of the case that would change the calculus (perhaps there are other relevant contributory reasons regarding the relevant corporations, etc), but that wouldn't undermine the general point.

Funding

This work was supported by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation grant number 90069137.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Baatz, C. (2014). Climate change and individual duties to reduce GHG emissions. *Ethics, Policy and Environment*, 17(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2014.885406>
- Barry, C., & Macdonald, K. (2019). Ethical consumerism: A defense of market vigilantism. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 46(3), 293–322. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12124>
- Boey, G. (2016). Eating animals and personal guilt: The individualization of responsibility for factory farming. In: A. Barnhill, M. Budolfson, & T. Doggett (Eds.), *Food, ethics, and society: An introductory text with readings* (pp. 22–29). Oxford University Press.
- Budolfson, M. (2012). *Collective action, climate change, and the ethical significance of futility*. Princeton University.
- Budolfson, M. (2016). Consumer ethics, harm footprints, and the empirical dimensions of food choices. In: A. Chignell, T. Cuneo, & M. Halteman (Eds.), *Philosophy comes to dinner: Arguments about the ethics of eating* (pp. 163–181). Routledge.
- Budolfson, M. (2019). The inefficacy objection to consequentialism and the problem with the expected consequences response. *Philosophical Studies*, 176, 1711–1724. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-018-1087-6>
- Budolfson, M. (Manuscript). Collective action, climate change, and the ethical significance of futility.
- Fischer, B. (2020). *The ethics of eating animals: Usually bad, sometimes wrong, often permissible*. Routledge.
- Hale, B. (2011). Nonrenewable resources and the inevitability of outcomes. *The Monist*, 94(3), 369–390. doi:10.5840/monist201194319
- Hedberg, T. (2018). Climate change, moral integrity, and obligations to reduce individual greenhouse gas emissions. *Ethics, Policy and Environment*, 21(1), 64–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2018.1448039>
- Hedden, B. (2020, July). Consequentialism and collective action. *Ethics*, 4, 530–554. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/708535?journalCode=et>
- Hershovitz, S. (2011). The role of authority. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 11(7), 1–19. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0011.007>
- Hickey, C. (2017). *Global climate justice and individual duties*. Georgetown University.
- Hooker, B. (2000). *Ideal code, real world: A rule-consequentialist theory of morality*. Clarendon Press.
- Hourdequin, M. (2010). Climate, collective action and individual ethical obligations. *Environmental Values*, 19(4), 443–464. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327110X531552>
- Jameison, D. W., & Di Paolo, M. (2016). *Political theory for the anthropocene*. *Global political theory*. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Global+Political+Theory-p-9780745685182>
- Jamieson, D. (2014). *Reason in a dark time: Why the struggle against climate change failed—and what it means for our future*. Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, B. (2003). Ethical obligations in a tragedy of the commons. *Environmental Values*, 12(3), 271–287. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327103129341324>
- Kagan, S. (2011). Do i make a difference? *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 39(2), 105–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2011.01203.x>
- Kingston, E., & Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2018). What's wrong with Joy-Guzzling? *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 21(1), 169–186.
- Kutz, C. (2000). *Complicity: Ethics and law for a collective age*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lawford-Smith, H. (2016). Climate matters pro tanto, does it matter all-things-considered? *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XL*, 40(1), 129–142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12051>
- Lichtenberg, J. (2010). Negative duties, positive duties, and the 'new harms'. *Ethics*, 120(3), 557–578. <https://doi.org/10.1086/652294>

- Nefsky, J. (2011). Consequentialism and the problem of collective harm: A reply to Kagan. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 39(4), 364–395. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2012.01209.x>
- Nefsky, J. (2015). Fairness, participation, and the real problem of collective harm. In: M. Timmons (Ed.), *Oxford studies in normative ethics* (Vol. 5, pp. 245–271). Oxford University Press.
- Nefsky, J. (2017). How you can help, without making a difference. *Philosophical Studies*, 174(11), 2743–2767. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-016-0808-y>
- Nolt, J. (2011). How harmful are the average American's greenhouse gas emissions? *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 14(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2011.561584>
- Norcross, A. (1997). Good and bad actions. *The Philosophical Review*, 106(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2998340>
- Norcross, A. (2004). Puppies, pigs, and people: Eating meat and marginal cases. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), 229–245. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00027.x>
- Norcross, A. (2006). The scalar approach to utilitarianism. In: H. West (Ed.), *The Blackwell guide to mill's utilitarianism* (pp. 217–232). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, D. (2011). *On what matters*. Oxford University Press.
- Perry, S. R. (2013). Political authority and political obligation. In: B. Leiter & L. Green (Eds.), *Oxford studies in philosophy of law* (Vol. 2, pp. 1–74). Oxford University Press.
- Railton, P. (1984). Alienation, consequentialism, and the demands of morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 13(2), 164–171. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265273>
- Raz, J. (1986). *The morality of freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Raz, J. (2006). The problem of authority: Revisiting the service conception. *Minnesota Law Review*, 90 (2006), 1003–1044. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=999849
- Scanlon, T. (1998). *What we owe to each other*. Harvard University Press.
- Schroeder, M. (2008). *Slaves of the passions*. Oxford University Press.
- Schwenkenbecher, A. (2014). Is there an obligation to reduce one's individual carbon footprint? *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 17(2), 168–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2012.692984>
- Sinnott-Armstrong, E. K. (2018). What's wrong with Joyguzzling. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 21 (1), 169–186. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-017-9859-1>
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2005). It's not my fault: Global warming and individual moral obligation. In: W. Sinnott-Armstrong & R. Howarth (Eds.), *Perspectives on climate change: Science, economics, politics, ethics* (pp. 293–315). Elsevier.
- Waheed, H. (2012). Is ethical consumerism an impermissible form of vigilantism? *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 40(2), 111–143. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2012.01218.x>
- Williams, B. (1973). A critique of utilitarianism. In: B. Williams & J. Smart (Eds.), *Utilitarianism: For and against* (pp.77–150). Cambridge University Press.
- Zwolinski, M. (2007). Sweatshops, Choice, and Exploitation. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 17(4), 689–727. <https://doi.org/10.5840/beq20071745>