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Individual Moral Responsibility and the Problem of Climate Change

Abstract: The problems caused by anthropogenic climate change threaten the lives and well-being of millions, yet it seems that we, as individuals, are powerless to prevent or worsen these problems. In this essay we consider the difficulty of assigning moral responsibility in cases of collective action problems like the problem of anthropogenic climate change. We consider two promising solutions, the expected utility and rights based solution, and argue that both are incapable of explaining why individuals have moral obligations to address collective action problems. We believe, however, that this result does not justify inaction, instead it reveals a failure of moral philosophy to adequately address collective action problems. More work must be done to address the moral responsibilities that arise in cases of collective action problems and we close by pointing in the direction of some promising work in this area.

1. Introduction

The Earth's climate is changing, and that represents a serious risk to many of us. As a result of anthropogenic climate change (from here forward: climate change) we can expect an increase in droughts (and thus more fires), more severe storms, and rising sea levels. Needless to say, all of these things will likely have an impact on life as we know it. To take one example, consider the particularly pernicious problems associated with rising sea levels. Increasing global temperatures associated with climate change cause sea levels to rise due to melting glacial ice and the expansion of water as its temperature rises, likely contributing to a .19 meter rise in sea levels from 1901 to 2010, as well as the forecast of an additional .5 to 1 meter increase by the end of this century (IPCC 2013, 11, 25). While an increase in 1 meter may not seem significant we must remember that a large percentage of humanity lives in coastal regions, and much of our most fertile land can be found there as well. For example, should the sea rise by .5 meters the people of Bangladesh will lose 10% of their habitable land, and 20% should sea levels rise by a meter (Houghton 2009, 182). Needless to say, for the approximately 150 million people of Bangladesh who already live on the edge of subsistence such a loss would be devastating.

While coastal dwelling humans worldwide will face the consequences of rising sea levels, Bangladesh does represent a telling example of how climate change

will likely have a disproportionate impact on the world's poor. Heat waves and droughts along equatorial regions will have a significant impact on poor people's ability to provide for themselves. Further, the world's poor lack the necessary resources to adapt to the many problems that will come with rising global temperatures.

A further complicating factor is that some affluent countries have had a disproportionate role in causing climate change. A study done by Concordia University shows that seven nations—US, Russia, China, Brazil, India, the United Kingdom, and Germany—account for 63% of total contributions to observed climate warming before 2005. Responsible for 20% of total contributions, the US is the most egregious contributor (the next two largest contributors, China and Russia, are responsible for approximately 8% each) (Matthews et al. 2013, 3–5). According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, carbon emissions from the United States' transportation sector alone exceeds the total emissions of all but three countries—cars and trucks account for sixty percent of those emissions. Thus we take it that climate change, and the carbon emissions that contribute to it, are serious issues that represent real danger to the global population. It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that residents of affluent countries have a moral obligation to refrain from acting in ways that contribute to climate change. But what is perplexing to moral philosophers is whether any of us, individually, have a moral obligation to refrain from behavior that contributes to climate change, and if so, what general account of morality justifies this obligation.

While it may seem obvious that we are obligated to change our behavior that contributes to climate change, things may not be as they first appear. Climate change is an example of a collective action problem. Collective action problems involve cases in which any single act, taken individually, causes no harm, but numerous acts of that sort produce serious harms. A single car ride, taken by itself, produces no serious environmental harms. It certainly produces carbon and ozone emissions, but these are too diffuse to produce smog, respiratory problems associated with ozone emissions, or alter the climate. If no one else were driving a car, that action would make no difference. The problem, of course, is that many others—millions—are driving cars. When millions of us are driving cars the cumulative effect is calamitous. In light of this, we may think that we have an obligation to drive less or not at all. But then again, maybe not. If one person quits driving her car, but everyone else continues to do so, there would be no impact on climate change whatsoever. To put it more succinctly, if Jones drives his car to the local coffee shop, it will not make climate change worse, and if he does not drive it he does nothing to lessen the problems associated with climate change given that others will continue to act as they have in the past. And the point is reiterable for each time Jones drives his car. In effect, his actions make no difference at all; he is causally impotent. It is the collective's actions that matter and Jones, like most of us, has no control over that.

Thus, we are faced with two well-supported claims that are at odds with each other. On the one hand we can see quite clearly that climate change represents a serious problem, one that could have catastrophic effects on life on our planet. Any problem of this magnitude is one that we ought to take seriously and do

whatever we can as individuals to help ameliorate. On the other hand, it seems that we cannot do anything about this problem individually. Our actions, taken individually, do nothing either to exacerbate or to ameliorate the problem. In this paper we argue that this problem, the problem of causal impotence, is much more vexing for moral philosophy than many recognize. In what follows we will look at two plausible attempts to explain why individuals have moral obligations to address the collective action problem of climate change, and will argue that the problem of causal impotence undermines both of those arguments. We begin by considering consequentialist responses to the causal impotence problem, specifically Shelly Kagan's appeal to expected utility (Kagan 2011). We then consider rights-based views, focusing on Thomas Pogge's (2011) argument that our actions violate the rights of the world's poor. Ultimately we argue that both approaches fail to establish that we, as individuals, have obligations to alter our behavior (e.g., reducing our carbon footprint) due to the problem of climate change. While we do not take this to entail that we have no obligations to address the problem of climate change (or any other collective action problem), we do maintain that moral philosophy must provide a better framework for addressing collective action problems than what is presently on offer.

2. Consequentialism and Collective Action Problems

At first blush consequentialism seems well suited for justifying the claim that we are obligated to change our behavior due to its contribution to climate change. According to consequentialism the moral status of what we do is determined by its consequences—acts are right when they produce better consequences than other acts available to us, and acts are wrong when they produce worse consequences than other acts available to us. Of course, consequentialism requires some account of what consequences one should be promoting (or preventing), and according to classical utilitarians we should promote happiness and minimize suffering.¹

Consequentialism seems capable of addressing collective action problems since most of our behavior that contributes to climate change is not intrinsically bad—in and of itself driving a car seems morally neutral. The concern about driving is that doing so brings about changes in the environment that will lead to bad consequences. That is, our actions will produce harmful consequences, and those harms, as we have seen, are significant, while the pleasures gained from driving seem relatively trivial. It seems clear, based upon the consequences, that we should at the very least severely limit our driving.

Unfortunately, things are not that simple for consequentialism's analysis of collective action problems. For the consequentialist it is, of course, the consequences of our acts that make them right or wrong, and in collective action

¹ Many contemporary versions of utilitarianism avoid framing their position in terms of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, focusing instead on maximizing preference satisfaction, interests, or welfare. While these are interesting developments, for our purposes they do not matter. Our objections apply to both hedonistic and non-hedonistic versions of utilitarianism.

cases it appears that my actions have no significant consequences. That is to say, with respect to the harms produced by collective action problems, I am causally powerless to prevent those harms. If I never drive my car again, but others continue to behave as they have, then I will neither prevent nor even forestall any of the negative consequences associated with climate change. My contributions are far too minimal to change any of the outcomes. So too if I drive as I always have; again, my contributions will not accelerate or worsen the effects of climate change. So, it seems, according to the consequentialist, whether I drive or not has no effect whatsoever on climate change, hence consequentialism must be silent about the permissibility of driving my car. The problem of causal impotence remains.

Shelly Kagan claims that consequentialists have the resources to address causal impotence cases. Kagan argues that in collective action cases it may not be true that *all* individual acts are causally impotent. Rather, even though many individual acts do not make a difference, one single act can make a tremendous difference. So, while releasing one molecule of pollutant into the air may make no difference to the health or well-being of anyone, the billionth (or ten billionth, hundred billionth—whatever it may be) such act will make a difference. At that point the act ceases to be an insignificant tiny addition—it tips the scales from being harmless act to being a harmful pollutant. So, in a case like this, a triggering case², an act that is otherwise morally benign has morally significant consequences.

A similar point applies in cases of over use of resources.³ If all the members of a small community use their local fishing resource responsibly, there will be fish for all for the foreseeable future. Suppose one member takes one more fish than he should. This might not result in any reduction in the number of fish caught, let alone cause the fish population to crash. However, if enough people think (and behave) this way, the fish population (and the number of fish caught) will shrink and some member of the community will eventually pull that one fish from the water that causes the fish population to crash—her act triggers a calamitous result.

Kagan argues that all collective action problems are really triggering cases, and if so, the consequentialist can address collective action problems. Supposing that the collective action will bring about calamitous results, as is the case with climate change, then the consequentialist will argue we have reason to avoid those acts that might trigger such a calamity. In other words, if we know that if there is a triggering action or series of triggering actions, then anytime we perform such an action we risk bringing about the disastrous results. By needlessly driving cars we risk triggering the sorts of terrible outcomes associated with climate change. While Jones may have a nice car, and enjoy the comfort and convenience of modern automotive travel, the small gains here do not compensate

² To be clear, Kagan discusses two different kinds of cases in his essay: triggering cases and imperceptible harm cases. Ultimately Kagan argues that there are no such things as imperceptible harms, and as a result all cases should be treated as triggering cases. For an excellent discussion of Kagan's solution to imperceptible harms see Nefsky 2012.

³For an interesting discussion of these issues with respect to consuming resources see Schwartz 2012.

for the potentially disastrous losses. To consider an analogous case: suppose you are offered the chance to play a game the odds of which are tilted heavily in your favor—the odds of winning are 5:6. Suppose further that should you win the prize is quite nice, say \$500. So far one should have no hesitation to play. Once you find out that the game being played is Russian roulette, however, you should change your view of the game dramatically. Though there is only a small chance of the bad outcome occurring, the possible gains do not justify the risk. The costs of losing are so great, and the gains from winning—at least in comparison—are so trivial that it makes no sense to play the game. And so it goes for seeming trivial contributions to climate change. The convenience of traveling by car cannot compare to the horrors we will cause should we trigger some of the disasters associated with climate change the next time we drive. Even though the risk of triggering a terrible climate event is vanishingly small, for the most part, the trivial benefits for which we often use our cars are outweighed by the risk. Here expected utility dictates that it is better to forgo driving entirely (or at least for common, trivial reasons) than to risk the terrible outcomes.

Kagan's appeal to expected utility offers a promising strategy for addressing the difficulties that collective action problems pose for consequentialism. To be clear, Kagan need not argue that one single individual will trigger all the negative consequences associated with climate change. It may be that there is a series of ever worsening problems each of which are triggered by some act or small set of acts. None of this changes the fundamental point: the trivial joy we get from partaking in the collective action does not outweigh the terrible, though improbable, harm we risk to others and ourselves.

Still, we remain unconvinced. In what follows we will offer three reasons to think Kagan's strategy fails. First, we are concerned that the domain of our expected utility calculations is unclear. Sadly, a wide variety of risks attach to various actions. Why should expected utility focus on only some and not others? Second, we argue that expected utility does not always recommend avoiding risks: it depends on both the magnitude and probability of potential costs and benefits. In some cases expected utility recommends risking extremely unlikely harms of a very high magnitude for nearly certain benefits that are relatively trivial. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we argue that Kagan's solution provides no shelter for the consequentialist. If the best solution to collective action problems really is expected utility, then that solution requires abandoning a central tenet of consequentialism.

Consider first the problem of scope. When assessing expected utility in a typical collective action case, we are calculating the rather improbable likelihood that the act will trigger the calamity against the highly certain probability that the action will bring some trivial pleasure or other good. But for virtually all of our activities there is a wide variety of highly unlikely, but potentially significant, consequences. For example, suppose that Jones has a 1-in-10,000,000 chance of causing a terrible, climate related calamity each time he drives his car. However, there are also highly unlikely, but highly beneficial outcomes of driving his car as well. Perhaps there is some chance that while driving his car he will come across a car accident and save the life of a young child who will eventually develop

an environmentally clean source of energy. Perhaps the coffee he buys happens to have a terrible pathogen that, should it make it into the general population, will decimate humanity as we know it—a pathogen, as luck would have it, that his body is immune to and easily destroys. In such a scenario Jones’s car ride could potentially save many more lives than he risks; expected utility in this case would favor taking the drive.

Granted, these are far-fetched cases. But the point is that in addition to the extraordinarily low probability of triggering horrible climate change consequences, there is a range of extraordinarily positive consequences, however improbable, that an action such as taking a casual drive might trigger. That is, there is some small probability that driving our cars will bring about terrible results. However, there is also some small probability that driving will bring about outstanding results. Why focus on one set of probabilities and not the other? Expected utility calculations should treat such considerations evenhandedly. As far as the expected utility of a taking a casual drive, it seems that the probabilities at play for both the catastrophic and highly beneficial consequences are at best a wash. And the fact that a given act might produce some set of disastrous consequences cannot by itself be a decisive reason for condemning it.

That leads to our second concern with the expected utility reply to collective action problems, which is based on a familiar objection to utilitarianism: despite Kagan’s assurances that the expected utility calculations favor limiting driving, they have failed to show their work—they haven’t run the calculations for us, so we cannot properly scrutinize them. The central concern is that it is not always irrational or immoral (especially according to consequentialist accounts of rationality and morality) to risk serious harm if the risk is small enough and the payoff (should the harm not obtain) is large enough. The relatively certain increase in trivial happiness may outweigh the *highly* unlikely loss. We cannot dismiss the rather trivial gains merely because something calamitous is at stake. We must do the math. To emphasize the point one needs only keep in mind that expected utility does not always forbid playing Russian roulette. Here the number must change because the disastrous outcome is much more likely (one-in-six), but if there is a five-in-six chance of a tremendous benefit, then the right move, at least according to expected utility, is to play. We must know the odds of triggering the bad outcome against the odds of producing the benefit. Again, that an act risks catastrophe does not establish that it ought not be done. Expected utility does not unwaveringly require ‘opting out’ in collective action problem cases—it depends on the risks and rewards at stake.

Finally, endorsing the expected utility response appears to come at a high cost for the consequentialist. Remember that according to utilitarians, and consequentialists generally, actions are right or wrong depending on their consequences. As Kagan himself states, according to consequentialism “[...] the rightness or wrongness of a given act should depend upon the consequences of *that act*” (Kagan 2011, 112). The problem, however, is that if we are to forgo driving and other such activities because of their expected utility, then what matters morally speaking turns out not to be “the consequences of *that act*” at all. Suppose for example that none of our previous objections are successful and

the expected utility does tell me to avoid driving my car to the local coffee shop. Despite the fact that I know all of this, I still drive my car to the shop and enjoy a cup of coffee. Let us further suppose that, unsurprisingly, my act did not trigger any of the calamitous results we feared. It seems that the expected utilitarian wants to say that it was wrong of me to do so, but why? It cannot be because of the consequences of what I did—we know, *ex hypothesi*, that my action did not produce disastrous consequences. The core of consequentialism is that (as Kagan has stated) consequences matter, but if my act has no negative consequences, then it's unclear on what grounds consequentialism can condemn it. While the consequentialist might say that it is in general wrong to risk producing (as opposed to actually producing) terrible consequences, it is not clear that the consequentialist can condemn any specific action that, however risky it might have been, produces no negative consequences. *That* judgment cannot be based on the consequences of what we do. But then if it is wrong, the consequentialist owes us an explanation of why it is.

This problem should not be underestimated. If the expected utility strategy saves consequentialism from causal impotence problems, it does so at a price: it insists that the consequentialist give up the idea that the consequences of what we do determine its moral status. Needless to say this is a large price to pay. If it is wrong for someone to drive his car because of the remote possibility that his act will trigger calamitous results, then this divorces the wrongness of an action from the action's actual consequences. Risking a bad outcome is not the same as producing a bad outcome. A true consequentialist needs the latter to condemn our actions, but Kagan and others who appeal to expected utility produce only the former.

3. The Rights Based Approach and Collective Action Problems

Perhaps we should not be looking to individual actions and their consequences as the starting point for assigning responsibility in collective action cases. Often what makes these problems so serious are the institutional arrangements that perpetuate the worst kind of behaviors and protect the worst actors. To take one example, in 2009 the *European Union* (EU) adopted the *Fuel Quality Directive* (FQD) which classified different fuels' contributions to greenhouse gases, and recommended measures to help move away from dirtier forms of fuels and towards cleaner forms. The hope was that by implementing various strategies the EU would reduce its carbon emissions six percent by 2020. All of this is laudable, no doubt. Trouble arose in this case because the Canadian government, rightly concerned that oil developed from tar sands would be labeled as a dirtier fuel, feared that Canadian oil would face restrictions in European markets. The US government, under pressure from oil lobbyists, joined Canada in objecting to some of the provisions of the FQD. As a result the European Commission has proposed dropping provisions that would curb the use of dirty, high carbon fuels.

What's instructive about this is that the environmental impact of using oil from tar sands is expected to be significant, but the use of tar sands is not the result of any one's individual decision to drive her car. Rather, it is the result of policies and practices implemented by the likes of governments and energy executives, through processes from which the vast majority of agents are totally insulated. The FQD encouraged the development of cleaner fuels in the transportation sector, but pressure from governments and oil companies looks to be effectively gutting the FQD. According to the *US Natural Resource Defense Council* (NRDC), if the EU fails to act and limit the use of tar sands, the EU's use of tar sand oil will go from 4,000 barrels a day at present to 700,000 barrels per day in 2020. The NRDC estimates that the environmental impact of this would be the equivalent of adding six million cars to European roads. There is no reason to think this is an isolated case. Indeed the US government has done much to protect the interests of greenhouse gas producing industries at the cost of the environment. If we are looking for causally effective actions and actors, then we need look no further than the governments of modern, affluent countries. But what does this tell us about the morality of these practices? Who is morally responsible?

As we have seen the harms that arise from climate change are significant, and are distributed disproportionately on the poor. Following Thomas Pogge one might argue that we, the citizens of these affluent countries, are violating the rights of the world's poor by contributing to climate change.⁴ It is wrong to violate the rights of others, and if it can be shown that we, the citizens of economically advantaged countries, are violating the rights of the world's poor by contributing to climate change, then we can answer the question 'Who is to blame for the harms of climate change?'—we are, and as a result are morally obligated to do something about it.

Of course the savvy reader will already be suspicious of this claim. If we cannot establish that our drive to the local coffee shop contributes to climate change, how can we argue that our contributions to climate change have violated the rights of the poor? Our inability to establish the former makes any claim regarding the latter moot, or at least so it appears. Interestingly, Pogge offers an argument that may allow us to side step the problems facing the consequentialist's argument. To see how such an argument will go we need to establish what Pogge has in mind by a rights violation, and then how we might be violating the rights of the world's poor by contributing to climate change.

Pogge is interested in showing that our obligations to the world's poor extend beyond just a positive duty to lend assistance. To use an example offered by Pogge: suppose Jones comes across an injured child lying in the road, and he knows a quick and reliable route to the local hospital (Pogge 2011, 16). Most of us would think that it would be laudable to take the child to the hospital. Notice, however, that if the scenario were that the child is lying in the road

⁴ Pogge argues for a position something along these lines in Pogge 2011. The focus of Pogge's argument is the way economically advantaged countries impose unjust financial policies on the world's poor, but the arguments translate quite nicely to the harms associated with climate change.

because Jones struck him with his car, then we have no doubt that Jones has a very strong moral obligation to take the child to the local hospital. The former case is an instance of positive duties—our general duties to lend assistance. The latter is a case of negative duties—our duties to refrain from violating the rights of others. According to Pogge, we have negative duties to the world's poor that we have failed to comply with since we have violated their rights. We are thus obligated to alter our behavior in order to address those rights violations.

The advantage of focusing on negative duties rather than positive duties is at least two-fold. First, negative duties are typically taken to be more stringent than positive duties. To fail to comply with a negative duty is, special circumstances (as in a conflict with a more stringent negative duty) aside, to have committed a wrongful act or omission, but not necessarily so for failures to comply with a positive duty. While some doubt whether we have positive duties at all, or that failure to comply with positive duties is an instance of wrongful conduct, no such doubts apply in the case of violations of negative duties. Secondly, failure to comply with a negative duty entails that one has a duty to right the wrong that one has committed. Again, this is not so for positive duties. To return to the injured child case, while one may think that it is nice, but perhaps not required, to help the child that one comes across, there is no doubt that one is obligated to help the child that one strikes with one's own car. Thus, if it can be shown that we have a negative duty regarding the harms associated with climate change, not only do we have an obligation not to engage in behavior that violates this duty—in addition, those who violate these duties are further obligated to right the wrongs that they have committed.

According to Pogge, "(h)uman rights violations involve both the non-fulfillment of a human right and a certain causal responsibility of human agents for this non-fulfillment" (Pogge 2011, 3). So, two things must be established to bolster the case that citizens of the industrialized countries have violated the rights of the world's poor by contributing to climate change. First we must be able to identify a relevant human right that is being or has been violated. Then we must also be able to show that citizens of affluent countries have acted in such a way that we can justifiably hold them accountable for rights violations.

It is, of course, not too difficult to see how one might argue that climate change threatens human rights. Simon Caney argues that climate change represents a threat to three fundamental human rights: the right to life, the right to health, and the right to subsistence (Caney 2010, 166–9). As has already been discussed, climate change threatens to increase the severity of storms, like hurricanes and tornadoes, and this increase will certainly come at the cost of human life. The IPCC also expects that climate change will bring on increases in dengue fever, diarrheal diseases, and malaria, and thus represents a threat to health (Caney 2010, 168). Finally, we can see that climate change will threaten the right to subsistence because of drought brought on by temperature increases, crop failure due to flooding, and loss of land due to rising seas. For present purposes, we will assume that something resembling Caney's position is correct.

Now, can we identify a causal relation between the acts of citizens of affluent countries and the harms along the lines of those mentioned above, i.e., those that

represent human rights violations, that befall the world's poor? Again, things do not look promising. We could not establish a clear causal connection between our own behavior and the negative consequences associated with climate change, so we may be skeptical that things are any different here. There is reason, however, to be optimistic. For Pogge causal responsibility can be established in two ways; either we violate the rights of others individually or we do so by imposing institutional arrangements that violate the rights of others (Pogge 2011, 13). So, while the individual link between driving one's car to the local coffee shop and the harms of climate change are far too tenuous, the institutional arrangements that have exacerbated climate change are quite clear. Pressure on the EU to drop or weaken the *Fuel Quality Directive* is but one example. The US government is slow to raise or flat out refuses to raise fuel standards on the automotive industry, grants tax subsidies to support the oil industry, and so on. While we focus on the US only because it is one of the worst actors in respect to climate change; a similar story can be told for almost all affluent countries—they support or impose policies that exacerbate the worst effects of climate change, indeed those that arguably involve human rights violations.

The governments of affluent countries are thus implicated in the harms associated with climate change, and many of these policies have a significant causal impact on climate change. These governments have resisted policies to mitigate the worst effects of climate change, they have protected businesses and industries that contribute the most, and many have resisted even acknowledging that there is a problem to be addressed despite the best evidence that speaks strongly to the contrary. Still, citizens of affluent countries may wonder what this has to do with them. The answer is this: institutional rights violations in many of these affluent countries can be traced back largely, or at least in part, to the complicity of the citizens. Pogge's argument tells us that we can hold responsible those

“[...] who have sufficient mental maturity, education, and political opportunities to share responsibility for their government's foreign policy and for its role in designing and imposing supranational institutional arrangements.” (Pogge 2011, 2)

As citizens of affluent countries many of us know that we face these problems, we have a voice in the political decisions and representation of our governments, but we fail to insist that change be made. It is in this sense that we are complicit in the harms that befall and will befall the world's poor as the problems associated with climate change continue to worsen. We violate their rights, and thus transgress a negative duty.

While Pogge's appeal to negative duties appears to be promising, we remain skeptical that it can ultimately do the work for which it is employed. The advantage of Pogge's approach is that, while it requires that we be causally implicated for the human rights violations for which we are held responsible, it allows that we may be causally implicated directly or institutionally. We need not show that our car drive raised the average global temperature by any amount. Instead, we must simply show that we are complicit in the institutions that have brought about climate change. The evidence seems overwhelming

that governments of affluent countries have at best shirked their responsibility to address climate change, and at worst have actively magnified the problems of climate change. Citizens of affluent countries have failed to demand better and thus are implicated in the failures of their governments.

It is this last claim, however, that is crucial to the argument, yet establishing it proves much more difficult than would first appear. The trouble comes from establishing a citizen's causal influence over governmental policies. Remember that in order to be guilty of a rights violation on Pogge's account one must be causally responsible for that rights violation. We don't believe this can be shown.

To begin, there are compelling empirical reasons to doubt that affluent governments are responsive to their citizens in the way the rights based argument requires. Martin Gilens has studied how responsive politicians in the US are to the lower, middle, and upper classes, and the results are telling. Gilens has found that the wealthy exert a disproportional influence over government policy in the US. Gilens writes:

“The complete lack of government responsiveness to the preferences of the poor is disturbing and seems consistent only with the most cynical views of American politics. These results indicate that when preferences between the well-off and the poor diverge, government policy bears absolutely no relationship to the degree of support or opposition among the poor.” (Gilens 2012, 81)

In effect, the interests of the poor have little to no impact on government policy. We might hope that this could be explained away. Perhaps the poor hold rather anomalous viewpoints, but the data fails to support this. As it turns out, Gilens has found that when the preferences of the middle and lower class align, but are at odds with the upper class, responsiveness to the lower and middle class is “completely absent” (Gilens 2012, 85).

What we find then is that, for the most part, those of us who live in the US have very little impact on the policies of our government, and as a result should not be held responsible for what the government does or does not do. It appears in fact that the government has a strong bias in favor of the interests or preferences of the most wealthy. Most citizens simply do not have the influence that the negative rights argument requires. Indeed, if Gilens' argument is correct, then we should only hold the most wealthy responsible for the practices and policies of the US. The poor and middle class are essentially powerless, as an empirical matter, to effect political change. Moreover, since representation is settled by winner-takes-all elections rather than proportional representation, many find that their votes simply do not influence political representation at all. Dissenting positions have no voice whatsoever.

Of course, the question is not whether the governments of affluent countries could and should be doing better—they can and should. Our question is whether individual citizens can be rightly held responsible—especially in terms of a violation of the rights of the world's poor—for the failures of their governments. Pogge's argument requires that we show a causal relationship between

the actions of a citizen and the rights violation in question. The most obvious connection between average citizens and their government is at the ballot box. But elections are just another instance of a collective action problem. Should we change our votes, give our money to different political organizations, affiliate and rally with alternative political organizations? Perhaps, but none of this alone will ultimately change the corrupt practices of our governments. As individuals we simply cannot effect any change on our own.

This does invite a potential response: perhaps citizens of countries like the United States are not individually responsible for the actions of their governments. Could we argue instead that citizens are *collectively* responsible? So, instead of asking whether we, as individuals, are responsible for the harms caused by the governments that represent us, we should instead ask whether we are, as a *collective*, responsible for the harms caused by our government. Here it seems much more plausible to argue that, as a group, citizens of the US are responsible for the harms done by those who represent them. This is because it is the collective acts of US citizens that empower US politicians, and *their* actions produce the unacceptable outcomes. This seems to be a promising way to address a collective action problem.

Still, we remain unconvinced that even this approach offers an adequate solution to the collective action problem that is climate change. If we assess responsibility collectively we must still ask what is to be done as a result. Perhaps a tax should be imposed on the United States so that use of greenhouse producing energies is discouraged while cleaner sources of energy are also encouraged. But upon whom do we impose this tax? All citizens of the US equally? One argument for this is that since we are collectively culpable we should hold ourselves collectively responsible. But to parse responsibility evenly seems patently unjust. Even when a group is collectively responsible we can still make differentiations about relative levels of responsibility. Suppose Jones is a member of a particularly violent segment of the mafia. It is reasonable to think that all members should be held accountable for the organization's wrongdoing. If it turns out Jones was the mafia's bartender should we treat him differently from the mafia's boss, or the persons who actually killed the victims? Perhaps Jones, by mixing drinks, washing glasses, etc., allowed the other members of the mafia to focus their time and energy on more violent pursuits. Still, Jones's responsibility for the harms inflicted by the mafia must be lower than that of the mafia's bosses and enforcers, and assigning responsibility equally to each mafia member will mean either that Jones is held to a higher level of responsibility than is merited, or the bosses and enforcers will not be held adequately responsible. In effect, equal treatment in this case compounds the injustice.

As a matter of fact, the situation regarding the US and climate change seems much worse. If we tax all citizens of the US alike then we impose a much more severe burden on the poor than we do the rich. Suppose we add an environmental tax of 3% to all US citizens. For a poor family in the US this amounts to a profound loss of income, yet for the wealthiest this would hardly be noticed. But, as we've already seen, this gets things exactly wrong. The wealthiest enjoy the greatest control over the political situation and should arguably pay the

most, and just the opposite for the poor. It is as if, to return to the mafia example, we were to punish the mafia's bartender most severely and the mob boss and enforcers most leniently.

We are thus faced with a dilemma: either we treat all citizens the same or we differentiate based upon contribution. If we treat all citizens the same it appears we do so only by imposing a serious injustice. If we differentiate based upon contribution then it seems we cannot resist the conclusion that many of us, perhaps a large majority, have little or no causal influence over our government's programs and policies and cannot be held responsible for them. We are back to the question we started with: who is properly held responsible for the harms affluent countries impose?

4. Conclusion

We began this essay by asking whether any of us can be held individually responsible for the harms associated with climate change. When we look to the most common ethical theories used to evaluate individual responsibility—consequentialism and rights theory—the answer, surprisingly, seems to be: no, we cannot be held individually responsible for climate change. One might wonder then whether this is an invitation for all of us to do nothing. We resist this conclusion strongly. We have found that our most commonly employed ethical theories appear to be ill-suited to address collective action problems. We believe that this shows that we must consider new and better ways to address these problems.

Indeed the recent literature contains promising strategies for arguing for individual moral responsibility in the face of causal impotence. For instance, Brad Hooker (2000) has argued for a version of rule-consequentialism that he claims not to be motivated by a commitment to producing good consequences. Instead, his version of rule-consequentialism appeals to a set of criteria for theory selection in general, which he claims to be best satisfied by his version of rule-consequentialism. And Christopher Kutz (2000) has argued, on essentially deontological grounds, that one can be complicit in collective wrongdoing even when one's behavior makes no causal difference, and on this basis be held morally accountable for complicit participation. Although he is critical of many of the specifics of Kutz's account, David Schwartz (2010) has developed an alternative account of being a responsible consumer that mirrors Kutz's position in some important ways, as in relying on the idea of complicity. And finally, we might look to Thomas E. Hill, Jr.'s (1983) argument that we should begin to approach issues about environmental ethics by asking "What kind of person should I be?" as opposed to "What am I obligated to do?" Paraphrasing a central point of Hill's, instead of asking "What interests or rights are at stake in behavior that seems to contribute to environmental degradation or severe deprivation for the world's poor?" perhaps we should be asking "What kind of person would do such a thing?", e.g., continue to spew carbon into the atmosphere or fail to protest

against or otherwise question the policies of their own governments that are causally implicated in the plight of the world's poor.

We are causally impotent in many ways, and with respect to climate change there may be little that we can do individually to mitigate or prevent the worst harms associated with rising global temperatures. We do not take this, however, to be a call for complacency, just the opposite, we see this as an invitation for moral philosophy to do better, to address not merely the moral obligations of the individual, but to think more creatively and more seriously about the moral obligations that we have not just as individuals but also as collectives.

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