

Causal Impotence and Procreation

1. Background: Last time, in an effort to explain the wrongness of actions like joyriding in a gas-guzzling SUV, I proposed that there is a prima facie duty not to contribute to collective harms. It's truth is motivated by our verdicts in cases like Car Push (Light Exercise) and Harmless Torturers (Foreseeing Variant). Place it alongside the duties of non-maleficence (do no harm) and beneficence (prevent harms, and promote goods), and word it as follows:

Group Harm Principle: It is prima facie morally wrong to perform an action that makes you a member of a harmful group/collective action – EVEN WHEN your individual contribution makes no difference, and you lack any malicious intent.

And this duty is especially strong when the harm caused is significant, and refraining from joining the group is not costly. But, Joyguzzling has all of these features:

- (a) Performing the action makes you a **member of a harmful collective activity**
- (b) Your contribution **makes no difference** to the total amount of harm
- (c) You **do not intend, but foresee** that the group will collectively cause harm
- (d) This harm caused by the group is **significant**
- (e) **Refraining isn't costly** (i.e., no significant harm or cost to yourself)

Therefore, joyguzzling is immoral (*and this is generalizable to ALL "luxury" emissions*). Here's an argument by analogy that avoids appealing to the Group Harm Principle:

Argument Against Causally Impotent Luxury Emissions

1. It is prima facie morally wrong to push the car in the foreseeing variants of Car Push and Harmless Torturers.
2. Joyguzzling is morally equivalent to one's actions in Car Push and Harmless Torturers (foreseeing variants). [**These actions all have features (a)-(e) above.**]
3. Therefore, joyguzzling is prima facie morally wrong. [**and this is generalizable**]

2. Is Subsisting Immoral?: But wait... If the above is correct, then not only should I refrain from joyguzzling—but I *also* shouldn't heat my home in winter, or cook my food, or use a dialysis machine when my kidneys are failing!

If Our Emissions Cause Harm: This is especially clear if our emissions cause harm. For then, subsistence emissions to extend your own life would be morally analogous to the following:

Toxic Cure: You are sealed in a room with an innocent person and find yourself suddenly terminally ill. To survive, you must immediately manufacture a cure, which will have the unfortunate side-effect of releasing a lethal gas which will kill your roommate.¹

In Toxic cure, your life is on the line. If you do not act, then you will die. Unfortunately, your action will cause serious harm to someone else, who poses no threat to you. In this case, it seems morally wrong to act, even if you do so without intending the harm.

Yet, if subsistence emissions seriously harm others (as Broome and Nolt claim), then they have all of the same features as Toxic Cure! Here's an argument by analogy:

Why Subsistence is Immoral, If Our Emissions Cause Harm

1. Creating the cure in Toxic Cure is morally wrong.
2. If our individual emissions cause serious harm, then subsistence is morally equivalent to creating the cure.
3. Therefore, **if** our individual emissions cause serious harm, then subsistence is morally wrong.

If Our Emissions Cause No Harm: In my defense of the Group Harm Principle, I grant that we are causally impotent with respect to climate change – i.e., our individual emissions make no difference to the total amount of harm. So, would subsistence emissions still be immoral in that case?

At first glance, it seems so, since subsisting makes you a member of a harmful collective action. But, not so fast.

Cases like Toxic Cure show us that we are obligated to make tremendous personal sacrifices in order to avoid **DOING** harm. But, it seems plausible that we are not obligated to make huge personal sacrifices in order to avoid **ALLOWING** harm, or even—I argue—making causally impotent contributions to collective harms. For example, consider the following case:

Car Push (Anti-Venom) Four people are pushing a car off of a cliff with an innocent person trapped inside of it. It takes the strength of three people to push the car. You are a bystander who has just been bitten by a poisonous rattlesnake. There is some anti-venom under the car, which will save your life. However, if you approach the car without helping to push it, you know with certainty that the

¹ This case is based on one discussed by Philippa Foot & Judith Jarvis Thomson: A doctor can save 5 patients by operating on them, but this will release a poisonous gas which kills a 6th nearby patient who cannot be moved.

others will forcibly prevent you from reaching the anti-venom, and you will die. So, correctly seeing that your contribution will make no difference to the amount of harm done, you help to push the car. As the car and its passenger hurtle downward toward their destruction, you reach the now-accessible anti-venom in time to save yourself.

Here, it seems PERMISSIBLE to help to push the car. Why? Because refraining from doing so would cost you your life!

Once again: **We are not obligated to make huge personal sacrifices in order to avoid making causally impotent contributions to collective harms.**

I have only argued that we have SOME prima facie duty not to contribute to massive systemic harms. But prima facie duties can be overridden by other, stronger, competing moral considerations.

(Why is your duty not to contribute to collective harms overridden? In Anti-Venom, refraining from contributing is **optional** because you have a competing justifier – namely, saving your own life. By contrast, in Light Exercise, if you refuse to help push the car, you'd only be giving up some light exercise – a trivial cost. So, you do NOT have a strong justifier for contributing to the collective harm in that case.)

In light of this, I propose that, we are morally obligated to refrain from contributing to massive systemic harms (in causally impotent ways) UNLESS refraining would be *significantly* costly to our own well-being, or would cause us to violate some other, stronger prima facie moral duty. Good news! It's permissible to subsist!!!

To sum up, **if our individual emissions do NOT cause any harm:**

- **SUV Joyriding is still wrong** because it is morally equivalent to pushing in Car Push (Light Exercise). (*Not joyriding costs you basically nothing.*)
- **Subsisting is permissible** because it is morally equivalent to pushing in Car Push (Anti-Venom). (*Not subsisting costs you everything.*)

In both cases, you join up with a collective action where your individual contribution makes no difference, but the GROUP's action is harmful. The difference is that the stakes are much higher for you in the second case.

In short, embracing individual causal impotence opens a plausible route toward morally condemning luxury emissions while morally justifying subsistence emissions. (Whereas, if our individual emissions DO cause severe harm to others, then both our luxury AND our subsistence emissions are immoral! Uh-oh!)

(What do you think? Is my view here plausible? Why or why not?)

3. Application to Procreation: We have seen that making causally impotent contributions to collective harms is immoral when refraining isn't costly at all (Light Exercise), but permissible when refraining costs you everything (Anti-Venom). Yet, the cost of giving up biological procreation seems to fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Is it permissible or what?

My View: I'm willing to grant that, if there exist any potential parents who would be forfeiting a good or meaningful life by not procreating, then bringing a child into existence is permissible for them – *provided that* our emissions cause no harm.

[Clarifications:

- Likely, this need can be fulfilled via **adoption**. So, an appeal to the costliness of not having children works best for those who cannot afford or do not have access to adoption.
- Second, even in that case, surely one can enjoy all (or at least most) of the benefits of parenting, pregnancy, passing on one's genes, etc., with just **ONE child**.
- Also, note that **I am NOT arguing for a law** enforcing this.]

Objection: If claiming that giving up children will cost you too much happiness makes it permissible to procreate, then can't the eco-glutton just make the same appeal?

Reply: My reply is very brief, but it is essentially this: Likely, such an eco-glutton either (a) is being disingenuous, or (b) has some issues of misplaced desires that need working through. I don't say so in the paper, but I'm sympathetic to the idea that there are certain objective goods worth pursuing, or some objective distinction between things that are appropriate to desire or pursue, and things that are not. Plausibly, procreation is one of those objectively good or appropriate-to-desire things, while gluttony is not.

Suggestions for further consideration:

- Can my proposal be applied to other issues (e.g., factory-farmed meat)?
- Am I committed to the conclusion that driving is immoral? (~40k deaths/year)
- Imagine that producing 1,000 clicks saves a child's life in Harmless Torturers. Does my proposal entail that they could permissibly torture the 1,000 victims?