

## Against Individual Responsibility (Sinnott-Armstrong)

**1. Individual Responsibility:** Sinnott-Armstrong admits that climate change is a problem, and that governments probably have an obligation to do something about it. But, he claims, it does not follow from the fact that there is responsibility at the GROUP level that there is also responsibility at the INDIVIDUAL level. Consider two examples:

- There is an important bridge that is in disrepair. The government ought to repair it, but is doing nothing about it. Does it follow that \*I\* as an individual have some responsibility to help to repair it?
- The government suspends its public education program and children are no longer learning reading, writing, and arithmetic. Does it follow that \*I\* as an individual have some responsibility to teach my children these things?

Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that, while it is plausible that I DO have some responsibility to teach my children in the second case, it is NOT plausible that I have some responsibility to fix the bridge in the first case. So, perhaps only SOMETIMES an obligation at the group level transfers to an obligation at the individual level.

The question is, which of these two categories does climate change fall into? If the government is not working to mitigate climate change (as is in fact the case), do \*I\* have some responsibility as an INDIVIDUAL to do my part to mitigate it? For instance, is it WRONG for me to take a joyride in an SUV on a Sunday afternoon just for the fun of it?

**2. It's Not My Fault:** Sinnott-Armstrong admits that he FEELS as if such individual actions are wrong. But, ultimately, he offers an argument against this intuition. He begins by asking, WHY would it be wrong to take a joyride in my SUV? If it IS wrong, then this verdict must be grounded in some moral principle. Here is a plausible one:

**The Harm Principle:** An action is morally wrong if it causes harm to others.

This should look familiar. It basically expresses the duty of non-maleficence. But, WHEN is an action a cause of harm to others? Sinnott-Armstrong's Answer: Plausibly, when it is either a necessary and/or a sufficient condition for that harm.

**Necessary Condition:** X is a necessary condition for Y when X **must** occur in order for Y to occur. In other words, without X, Y will not occur. For instance, buying a lottery ticket is a necessary condition for winning the lottery.

*[Expressed differently: Y only if X; If not-X, then, not-Y]*

**Sufficient Condition:** X is a sufficient condition for Y when the occurrence of X **guarantees** the occurrence of Y. In other words, wherever X occurs, Y does too; e.g., jumping into a swimming pool is a sufficient condition for getting wet.  
*[Expressed differently: If X, then Y]*

Notice that, unlike sufficient conditions, merely necessary conditions do NOT guarantee their results (buying a lottery ticket does not GUARANTEE that you will win the lottery—it is just that you cannot possibly win the lottery without one). And merely sufficient conditions, unlike necessary conditions, do not HAVE to occur in order for their results to still occur (you do not HAVE to jump into a swimming pool in order to get wet; running around in the rain or stepping into the shower will also do the trick).

*[As a view of causation: Flipping this light switch is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for this light going on. If I flip it, it goes on. If I do not flip it, it does not go on.]*

Sinnott-Armstrong claims that, **in order for it to be true that I have CAUSED harm to someone, I must be a necessary or a sufficient condition for that harm (or both)**. But, with respect to the harm that results from climate change, I am neither. Consider:

**I am not a necessary condition for the harm:** My individual emissions are not REQUIRED in order for climate change to occur. If I refrained from emitting altogether, the same amount harm would still occur without my contribution.

**I am not a sufficient condition for the harm:** My individual emissions do not by themselves GUARANTEE that climate change will occur. If I was the ONLY person producing emissions, the harms of climate change would not occur at all.

Why is this? Consider: My emissions go into the atmosphere where they are dispersed and COLLECTIVELY cause harm when combined with everyone else's emissions. But, then, my emissions are merely "a drop in the bucket". For instance, imagine that, during a destructive flood, I went outside and added a single droplet of water into the flood water.<sup>1</sup> The flood harms a lot of people. But, surely MY contribution does not increase the total amount of harm! Rather, my contribution makes no difference.

But, then, I am NOT personally a cause of any of the harm that results from climate change. And therefore, I am also not doing anything morally wrong when I produce emissions. In short, I have no moral obligation to do anything about climate change.

*[Note that this is STRONGER than the "causal impotence" objection to purchasing meat. While eating meat is not a NECESSARY condition for animal death, it IS a SUFFICIENT condition for animal death (i.e., even if I was the only one eating meat, this would still guarantee that an animal had died; though it is still not sufficient for factory-farming).]*

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Burning one gallon of fuel puts an amount of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere equivalent to adding a single drop of water to a flood that is 1 meter deep, and covers 18.2km<sup>2</sup>, an area five times the size of Central Park.

**3. Alternative Principles:** Can we ground the wrongness of individual emissions in some other way? Let's look at some possibilities.

**(1) The Simple Division Approach:** An action is morally wrong if it *contributes* to a collective harm—in this case, the agent is responsible for her share of the total.

*[Note: This was one of Norcross's replies to causal impotence with respect to factory-farming. Sinnott-Armstrong does not address it in this reading, but does address it in his 2018 follow-up article with Ewan Kingston, 'What's Wrong With Joyguzzling?']*

Clearly, the COLLECTION of human greenhouse gas emissions is causing harm. And clearly, each of our individual emissions CONTRIBUTES to the total amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In that case, a simple calculation will tell us our share of the total. In fact, John Nolt has already done the math. He writes (2011), "the average American causes through his/her [lifetime] greenhouse gas emissions the serious suffering and/or deaths of two future people."

Reply: This is a confusion. By contributing a share to the total greenhouse gas emissions, it does not follow that I therefore CAUSE some percentage of the total harm. To claim so would be to make the mistake of thinking that **a part of a cause of some harm is therefore a cause of a part of that harm**. But, this is false. (See 17:30 of [this video](#).) In short, we can CALCULATE our share of the total harm. But, it is a mistake to infer from this that we therefore CAUSED that share of the total harm.

*[Example: Imagine an elephant. A collection of neurons caused this image in your mind, and each of those neurons is a part of that cause. But, it would be a mistake to infer from this that therefore each neuron caused a part of the image in your mind.]*

**(2) The Risk Principle:** An action is morally wrong if it causes an increase in the RISK of harm to others.

Even if our individual emissions cause no harm, surely they increase the PROBABILITY that harm will occur. And, an action can still be morally wrong even if it does not actually harm anyone, and even if one's intentions are not malicious, but does increase the RISK of harm to others. (For instance, consider someone who drives home drunk, but doesn't actually hit anyone—this still seems morally wrong.)

Reply: The problem with this proposal is that (a) It is not clear that I even increase the RISK of harm to others with my behavior [*Consider: What is the probability that plucking a single hair from someone will make them go from not bald to bald? Plausibly: Zero*], (b) Even if it did, it is not clear that there is any particular individual who is endangered by my activity, and (c) Worst of all, this would be far too restrictive. For, EVERYTHING we do adds at least a little risk to someone else. For instance, just driving a car AT ALL (even

sober) runs a small risk of hurting someone. On this principle, almost everything we do would be morally wrong to some extent.

*[Is he right about this? Isn't it plausible that I DO have a moral obligation to not increase the risk of harm to others, even if the risk is very small, so long as the cost to myself is minimal? And, arguably, the cost to myself of refraining from an SUV joyride would not be very great. Furthermore, even if we granted that my individual emissions only raise the probability of harm by an amount so small that it is negligible—what if that harm is HUGE? An action that only has a one-in-a-million chance of killing a million people still has an expected value of one death, and would therefore still be wrong to perform. \*]*

**(3) The General Action Principle:** An action is morally wrong if it would be bad or harmful for everyone to perform an action of the same kind.

Reply: First, it would NOT be bad for everyone to go for one single Sunday joyride. Climate change is the result of emissions all year round over decades, or even centuries.

Furthermore, is the principle above even correct? Wouldn't it ALSO be disastrous if everyone in the world refused to become a doctor? Or if everyone in the world moved to Williamsburg? But, surely it is not morally wrong to not become a doctor, or to move to Williamsburg. In short, this principle is false.

**(4) The Group Principle:** An action is morally wrong if it contributes to the collective action of a group of individuals who are all performing an action of a certain type, and that GROUP'S action causes harm.

Still, clearly the COLLECTIVE action of human beings emitting greenhouse gases is causing harm. So, the GROUP is surely to blame for the harm. Furthermore, when I emit greenhouse gases, I JOIN this collection as one of its contributors. So, even if my individual contribution makes no difference, plausibly I still incur some of this blame at the individual level. For instance, consider the following case:

**Car-Push:** You and 4 of your friends are pushing a car off of a cliff with an innocent person inside of it. It only takes the strength of 3 people to push the car. The car goes off the cliff and the person inside dies.

You are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the person's death in this case—not sufficient because you would not have been strong enough to push the car by yourself, and not necessary because it only takes 3 people to push the car and your added strength was not required. In fact, NO single person is a necessary or sufficient cause of the death in this case. So, has NO ONE done anything wrong? Is NO ONE to blame in this case? That is absurd.

Reply: Sinnott-Armstrong responds to this worry by pointing out that the **intentions** of the people pushing the car matter in this case. You and your 4 friends INTEND the death of the one person. So, perhaps, even in cases where someone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a harm, one's INTENTIONS can still make an action wrong, if they are malicious intentions. But, when I go for a joyride in my SUV, I do not intend harm to anyone. Presumably, I do not drive maliciously, but just for the fun of it.

It is clear (says Sinnott-Armstrong) that in cases where someone contributes to a group harm in a causally impotent way WITHOUT malicious intent, she has done no wrong:

**Noisy Airport:** You are in a crowded airport, where EVERYONE is talking. It is so noisy, that several people miss an important announcement on the intercom, and miss their flight as a result. At some point, amidst the noise, you say to your friend, "I wish everyone would be quiet!"

Is saying something to your friend morally wrong in this instance? It doesn't seem so. But, think about it: As a group, you all collectively (and unintentionally) brought about a harm to several people (who missed their important flight). When you spoke to your friend, you contributed to the collective loudness of the group which was the cause of this harm. Therefore, by The Group Principle, you have done something morally wrong.

*[Is Sinnott-Armstrong being fair here? Plausibly, in cases where (a) the harm that the group is causing is **severe**, (b) the agent is **aware** that the group is causing harm, and (c) refraining from the activity would **not be costly** to the agent, then perhaps it WOULD be wrong for her to contribute to the group action. It is not clear that Noisy Airport meets conditions (a) and (b). Can you modify that case so that it does? What are your intuitions in this modified case?]*

[Note: Here are some other principles, which we likely did not discuss in class:

**(5) Virtue Ethics:** An action is morally wrong if it expresses a vice or is contrary to some virtue of character.

Virtue Ethics is a system of ethics that is more concerned with the CHARACTER of the individual, rather than the nature or consequences of their actions. One lives rightly, says the virtue ethicist, so long as one's actions display a virtuous character. On this view, we might be able to explain why the SUV joyride is morally wrong—namely, because doing so is not VIRTUOUS.

Reply: In order for this to be convincing, one would need to provide some reasons for WHY the joyrider is not acting virtuously. And there seem to be no such reasons; after all, the joyrider is just out for a bit of innocent fun.

[Is Sinnott-Armstrong right? Perhaps one reason we could provide to back up the virtue ethicist's claim is that the joyride is WASTEFUL (it is not necessary to survive, and so it unnecessarily uses up resources; it is "eco-gluttony"), and acting wastefully is not very virtuous, and is therefore morally wrong according to virtue ethics.]

**(6) The Indirect Harm Principle:** An action is morally wrong if it leads to OTHER actions which, collectively, cause harm to others.

The idea here is that, when I go on my joyride, others will see me and this might cause them to view the action as morally acceptable, and then THEY TOO might go on joyrides. Additionally, I personally might cultivate a HABIT of going on joyrides, so that my first joyride leads to a lifetime of joyrides. Collectively, my single action has set off a domino effect that leads to a collection of actions that ARE harmful, collectively.

Reply: First, this would only condemn the actions of those who are extremely popular, or have addictive personalities. Second, our emissions are so miniscule compared to the whole, it's not even clear that a LIFETIME of Sunday joyrides makes any difference. (For example, 50 years worth of weekly 1 gallon joyrides would be equivalent to adding a little over half a cup of water to our 1-meter-deep flood 5 times the size of Central Park.)

**(7) The Ideal Law Principle:** An action is morally wrong if it breaks a law that the government OUGHT to enforce (even if it is not currently doing so).

Sinnott-Armstrong admits that the government SHOULD be enforcing laws that would curb climate change. After all, at the government level, some governments ARE sufficient causes of climate change (If the U.S. were the only country emitting, for instance, then some climate change WOULD most likely still occur). So, one might suggest, perhaps we are obligated to act NOW as if those laws were already in place.

Reply: This seems false. For instance, perhaps there is a BETTER tax system that SHOULD be in place, rather than the one that we currently have. But, does this entail that we should right NOW be sending in the amount of taxes that the ideal tax code would require of us? Surely not.

**(8) Kant's First Categorical Imperative:** An action is morally wrong if would lead to a contradiction when universalized.

But, "Everyone drives an SUV" does NOT lead to a contradiction when universalized.

**(9) Kant's Second Categorical Imperative:** An action is morally wrong if it intentionally uses someone as a mere means to an end.

But, I do NOT use someone else as a mere means to an end when I go on a joyride.]

**5. Conclusion:** Sinnott-Armstrong concludes that no individual is morally responsible for climate change, or the harm that results from it.

If it were morally wrong to go on a single joyride because it emits a bit of excess CO<sub>2</sub>, then it would follow that MOST of our actions are morally wrong. For, merely going for a run around the block emits excess CO<sub>2</sub> (since you exhale more of it when your heart rate is up). If we had a moral duty to refrain from any activity that emits excess CO<sub>2</sub>, then we would be obligated to lie as motionless as possible, exerting ourselves as little as possible. But, that is absurd.

Note 2 things that he is NOT saying:

- Sinnott-Armstrong does NOT conclude that it is not a GOOD thing to conserve resources. It might be a very good thing not to over-consume, even if it does not directly causally prevent the harm caused by climate change. It is just not morally OBLIGATORY to do so. We call such permissible, but non-obligatory actions "supererogatory".
- Sinnott-Armstrong does NOT conclude that there is NO responsibility for climate change. He only says that we are attributing blame to the wrong things. A few GOVERNMENTS ARE morally responsible, since their actions ARE necessary and sufficient for global warming. So, governments have an obligation to start doing something about climate change.

*[\* Why think that there is a tiny probability of causing a HUGE amount of harm? Some climate scientists believe that there are causal "tipping points" or "thresholds". Imagine putting tiny pebbles on a see-saw where someone sits at the other end. Each pebble makes no difference—but, at some point, a single pebble will make a HUGE difference, as the see-saw tips the other way. Similarly, voting in elections clearly has tipping points. The idea here is this: MOST of our individual emissions make no difference. But, every once in a while, a single individual emission makes a HUGE difference as it causes a tipping point to be reached. I can't know whether my individual contributions ever cause a tipping point to be reached. But, I DO know that my individual contributions have a 1/n<sup>th</sup> chance of causing a tipping point to be reached. In short, each of my individual emissions has a tiny chance of causing a HUGE amount of harm.]*