Individual Obligation

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In the previous chapter, I mentioned that John Broome, in his discussion of obligations regarding climate change, borrows a helpful Kantian distinction between duties of justice and duties of goodness. On his view, recall, institutions—which are able to make massive changes to emissions—are the primary bearers of duties of goodness, as individual emitters simply do not do significant good by directing their resources towards mitigating climate change (Broome, 2012). If the arguments of the previous chapter are on track, then Broome's argument appears to support the causal impotence objection: given the scale and complexity of climate change, virtually nothing an individual does could matter to the climate-related outcome. While each emitting activity makes a technical difference—resulting in slightly more atmospheric carbon than there was before—it does not make anything like a significant difference to the overall problem of climate change.

What Broome pointed out, though, is that even though we do not, as individuals, have duties of goodness regarding our emitting behavior, there are other candidate duties that individuals could bare. He calls these 'duties of justice', but this title can be slightly confusing, for a couple of reasons. First, 'justice' considerations are often taken to be more specific than merely the counterpart to 'goodness' considerations (in particular, justice is often taken to be related to 'fairness', 'desert', or 'equality') … And second: in exploring ways that each of us may have a moral burden or responsibility regarding our procreative behaviors, we might think that there are considerations other than 'duty'. Indeed, later … I will borrow from Dale Jamieson the language of 'Green Virtues' to articulate the idea that perhaps we ought not to see ourselves as obligated to act in a certain way, but rather that we ought to develop certain character traits or virtues that predictably lead to our adopting environmentally-friendly practices. But having a virtue does not necessarily entail having any particular obligations. …

3.1 Duty Not to Contribute to Harms

The first candidate moral principle is a duty closely related to the duty not to harm. If it were the case that emitting carbon dioxide directly and obviously harmed, then there would be no problem making the case that we have a duty not to emit carbon dioxide (or to restrict our emissions in some way).[1] However, the first problem with utilizing such a principle was investigated in the previous chapter: the harms of climate change are the result of a massive collection of unrelated acts by uncoordinated individuals, and so it actually seems wrong to say that an individual act harms; this is why we focused above on the notion of 'making a difference' to the extent or severity of climate change. So in the context of a massively collective action that harms, we might think that our duty is not to make a significant difference. We discussed that candidate last chapter, and I am proceeding under the assumption that … individual … climate-related acts [make] no significant difference to the harms of climate change.

[1] Recall that this is how Broome actually gets to his conclusion that each of us is required to be a 'net-zero' emitter.

There is yet another problem with appealing to harm, however, and that is the *complexity* of the climate system, and the way in which our small, individual contributions of GHG get diffused throughout a massive system. Much of my individual emissions, for instance, may end up in a natural carbon sink, just through accident, in which case my particular emissions didn't even causally contribute to the harms of climate change (since my emissions aren't warming the atmosphere). This radical complexity and uncertainty leads some ethicists, like Dale Jamieson, to claim that not only do we not harm anyone with our emissions, but we don't even partially *cause* the problem with our emissions, or reliably and predictably *raise the probability* of climate harms by our emissions (Jamieson, 2014 , pp. 144–169).

This issue of causation is exceedingly difficult, and one might be skeptical that one's emissions, small though they are, play *no* causal role. After all, even if I get lucky, and my emissions get taken out of the atmosphere by a natural carbon sink such as a forest or the world's oceans, my emissions have just used up a small fraction of the earth's available carbon sinks, displacing other emissions into the atmosphere. In addition, not all ways of removing carbon from the atmosphere are equal; the forest that absorbs my CO_2 is a relatively short-term carbon sink, and the death of the trees in the future will release the gas back into the atmosphere; and the ocean is becoming more acidic as it absorbs more carbon dioxide.[2] So if I burn fossil fuels, I have liberated CO_2 from a long-term carbon sink; as a result, even if it gets removed from the atmosphere, it may displace other people's emissions from a carbon sink, or end up in the world's oceans, which acidify as they absorb carbon dioxide. In both cases, we might think that the very act of liberating plays *some*, *minute* causal role in the overall climate change problem.

But do these various fates of my emitted carbon dioxide constitute partially *causing the harms* of climate change? Again, the issue is clearly difficult. We would need a sophisticated account of causation, and any answer given would be subject to reasonable challenge. However, I don't think that we must focus on our causal role in harming in order to understand how we might have a duty not to *play a role* in the problem that causes harms. What could playing a role mean, if not partially causing the problem? Let's take a look.

There are a few different ways that we might think someone is playing a role in a serious moral problem, even if it was unclear whether her acts partially cause the problem.[3] One way might be acting in a way that would otherwise be innocuous, but which one knows produces something that is part of a massively problematic system. Consider the example of a low-level researcher who does basic science for a terribly corrupt corporation or political regime that uses all of its resources to harm innocent people. Given the kind of science she does, it is not the case that the scientist will produce a bomb or other mechanism of destruction for her tyrannical bosses; but she *is* producing something—knowledge—which will become part of a terrible system and

[2] Increased atmospheric CO_2 has led to oceans becoming about 30% more acidic than they were prior to the Industrial Revolution. According to business as usual predictions, we may see a further 150% rise in acidity by the year 2100, which would bring oceans to a pH level not seen in more than 20 million years (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d.)

[3] This line of thinking was originally inspired by Fruh and Hedahl (2013); the following explication of various ways that one can 'play a role' in systematic harms somewhat parallels that described in (Hedahl, Fruh, & Whitlow, 2016).

which, through some convoluted and unpredictable causal system, may someday help (in some very small way) the evil regime to do something awful. We can call this *contributing* to a system that harms.

In a different case, we can imagine German citizens during the Nazi occupation who are told to salute and chant, 'Heil Hitler' at various times. It is exceedingly implausible that honoring the Nazi regime in this symbolic way actually harms the Nazi's victims; however, doing it makes one an active participant in the abhorrent regime. It may well be that, given the particular costs of defecting in this case, it would be all-things-considered permissible to do as the Nazis demand. But the moral reaction we have suggests that there is, in fact, a problem, and it is with the role that we play regarding the morally awful system. Call this a case of *participating* in a system that harms.

Finally, there is the even more standard case of standing idly by while massive harms are being perpetrated. It is likely that in the United States, prior to the Civil War, there were at least some individuals who understood the moral horror of slavery, but who said and did nothing about it. These individuals would have benefitted from the practice of slavery—buying cotton products and food at lower prices thanks to slave labor—but would not have harmed any of the slaves themselves. The moral disturbance in this case doesn't come from the causal role in harming—it comes from the failure to fight an injustice, especially when the injustice provides one with benefits. In this case, we might think that an individual benefitting indirectly from the practice of slavery is *complicit* in its massive, systematic harms.

Contributing to, participating in, and being complicit in massive, systematic harms all seem morally bad, but to varying degrees. Perhaps one is not obligated to avoid complicity in all harms, but that complicity generally reveals cowardice or other vices. And perhaps participating in a system of harm is more objectionable, but still understandable and even excusable if the costs of failure to participate are very high at all (as in the Nazi case). The case of contributing to a massive, systematic harm seems the worst, as the role that one plays is more significant; it may still be a stretch to say that such a person *caused* any particular harms, even partially; but she did actively *contribute* to the system that did the harming. Further, it's worth noting that it's not always easy to distinguish between these different ways of playing a role in systematic harms, and that there is likely significant overlap; indeed, *contributing* to a system of massive, systematic harms will likely typically include *participating* in that system and being *complicit* in its harms.

It seems plausible to me that each of the ways of 'playing a role' in massive, systematic harms discussed above is plausibly *prima facie* morally wrong.[4] Our moral reactions to

[4] Literally 'on its face', the language of *prima facie* was adopted by philosophers to denote the provisional character of duties that have not yet been weighed against the competing goods of the actual world. A *prima facie* duty, then, is one that I am required to follow, if it is not outweighed by some other consideration. *Prima facie* duties are contrasted with *all-things-considered* duties, which emerge at the end of the weighting and balancing process among the various, relevant goods and reasons, and which tells us what we must, in the end, do. While some *prima facie* duties seem to always imply an all-things-considered duty ("do not murder," for instance), others are so all-encompassing that they regularly admit of trade-offs ("promote the good," perhaps). What we seem to be learning at this point is that the duty not to contribute to massive harms seems to be more like the latter than the former, and so discussion of its relative justificatory burden is important.

each of the cases are, I think, evidence that the action in question violates a duty—a duty not to play a role in massive, systematic harms. However, I did admit that complicity seems less bad than participation, which seems less bad than contribution to systematic harms. So I will formulate my candidate principle in the weakest way possible, and suppose only that there is a **Duty Not to Contribute to Massive, Systematic Harms**. This is not a duty not to *cause* harm—even partially—but is rather a duty not to inject oneself as an active contributor into the large, causally complex machine that is doing the harm.

This duty would make sense of how we judge many acts that either don't make a significant difference to a moral problem, or don't partially cause a serious moral problem at all. The example from the previous chapter was recycling: it seems I am obligated to throw my waste in the recycle bin rather than the trash can, even though my throwing a single piece of refuse into the trash would not make a significant difference, and would not clearly cause any harm. The justification is that waste management is a massive moral problem, and by throwing away my trash, I am contributing to it. Those who oppose factory farming might make a similar argument for the duty not to buy certain meats. Although some philosophers have argued that the very small causal role that one plays in the continued harm of animals justifies the duty not to purchase meat (see, for instance (Norcross, 2004, pp. 232–233)), the causal complexity of the system of factory farming might make the principle under investigation seem to be a more plausible justification. Factory farming is a system that generates massive harms for sentient creatures, and so we have a duty not to contribute to that system, and our small marketplace exchange is a form of contribution.

The duty not to contribute to massive, systematic harms makes sense of many of our environmental obligations, even if most individual activity does not make a 'significant difference' to the extent or severity of those harms. … If a duty not to contribute to harm can ground my duty to recycle, then surely it could ground an obligation to limit our much more carbon-expensive activit[ies] …