

Who Should Save the Climate?

THOMAS PÖLZLER

BENEDIKT NAMDAR

Department of Philosophy, University of Graz, Austria

Corona won't do it. Individuals can't. In the end, we must get states and corporations to meet their responsibility.

In a 2005 paper entitled “It’s not *my* fault: Global warming and individual moral obligations” Walter Sinnott-Armstrong introduces a by-now-famous scenario: It’s a sunny Sunday afternoon. You look out of the window and suddenly it hits you: How great would it be to go for a drive in your Sport Utility Vehicle — not to get somewhere; solely for the sake of pleasure: to feel the wind in your hair and the sun on your skin. That would be great indeed! But then it hits you again. Driving your gas-guzzling SUV emits greenhouse gases, and those gases are the cause of climate change. So you ask yourself: Am I morally permitted to take this drive?

Who is responsible?

A recent study squashes hopes that the corona crisis might solve the problem of climate change. 0.01 degree Celsius — that is how much (or rather how little) lockdowns are expected to have reduced global warming. But if the pandemic will not save the climate who is responsible for doing so?

It is pretty self-evident that industrialized states are morally required to act; especially those who emit much and have emitted much in the past. Large corporations must become much greener too (or, in the case of the fossil fuel industry, maybe even cease to exist). Yet, in addition to states and corporations, most of us think that *individuals* — including ourselves — have some responsibility to tackle climate change. We must reduce our personal emissions of greenhouse gases; for example, by eating less meat, not going on that air trip – and yes, also

by not getting in our gas-guzzlers on sunny Sunday afternoons and driving around just for the fun of it.

Most people think so? Well, a number of philosophers have recently argued that individuals are not morally required to reduce their personal emissions of greenhouse gases after all. Among them is, most famously, Sinnott-Armstrong, the inventor of the above gas-guzzler example.

The main argument by Sinnott-Armstrong and his allies is an instance of a more general philosophical puzzle: the so called problem of inefficacy. Individual reductions of greenhouse gases, Sinnott-Armstrong and his allies argue, are inefficacious. It just does not make any difference whether I go for my joyguzzle or not. Neither will it prevent hurricanes in South East Asia nor reduce sea level rise or save the polar bears. It will not have any noticeable effect on anyone at all. But if my emissions do not make any difference then how could I possibly be required to reduce them?

A difference after all

Since the publication of Sinnott-Armstrong's paper lots of philosophers have wrought their heads around this question. In the view of the authors of this blog post, an important part of the answer is to deny the question's antecedent part: it simply is not true that our individual emissions do not make any difference. Going for a joy-guzzle harms people in the future. It harms them in a real sense that some philosophers have even tried to calculate.

Here is, very roughly, why. Climate change is the result of molecules of greenhouse gases being emitted into the atmosphere. The more of these gases there are in the atmosphere, the more severe the consequences of climate change will be. And the more severe the consequences of climate change will be, the greater the harm that climate change will cause. Therefore, by emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere (by going for that joy-guzzle) we cause a small — very small — amount of harm.

There may also be another reason why individuals should aim for a lower carbon footprint. Above we claimed that states and corporations have a responsibility to tackle climate change. This means that individuals should get states and corporations to meet this responsibility. For example, they should vote for green parties, join rallies, boycott climate-damaging products etc. However, it would seem strange to join a climate rally in the morning and then, in the afternoon, enter one's gas-guzzler and blare a fair amount of luxury emissions

into the atmosphere. This smacks of a lack of personal integrity. It would indicate some mismatch or contradiction between my values and my actions.

Political action is key

So is it all on us as individuals? Are we the ones who are supposed to save the climate? The above notwithstanding, that would be a very wrong conclusion to draw. Even though we do not fully buy into their radical arguments, Sinnott-Armstrong and his allies are onto something. The climate-related harm caused by a ride with our joy-guzzler (or by eating a Schnitzel or flying out to New York), even if it is harm, is only small. Most greenhouse gases that we find in the atmosphere today are, in fact, not due to individuals but to states or corporations. For example, it has been estimated that on some interpretation more than 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions since 1988 can be attributed to just 100 companies.

So yes, as individuals we are obliged to reduce our personal emissions of greenhouse gases. But our related political obligation is far more important. We ought to get states and corporations to meet their obligations; we ought to vote green, join rallies, boycott climate-damaging products, do whatever we can. In the end only states and corporations have the power to mitigate climate change to a significant extent and thereby reduce its disastrous consequences for humanity and the rest of life. This does not mean that the actions of single large-scale actors such as Austria or BP will be sufficient to prevent dangerous climate change. But every single one of them can prevent *a lot* of future harm.

But wait, one might object, does not the problem of inefficacy apply to individuals' political actions as well? My green vote and my attendance at a climate rally seem to make just as little difference as my refraining from joyguzzling. Taken by themselves they will neither get Austria to meet its responsibility nor BP. This worry is legitimate but less pressing than in the case of individual emission reductions. Political actions sometimes do make a difference (one individual vote can swing an election result), and if they do then their effect tends to be huge; they can prevent the emission of very large amounts of greenhouse gases.

Standing firm

Needless to say, states and (even more so) corporations will not be convinced easily. They have a natural interest to outsource their climate change obligations to us as individuals, rooted in the logic of neoliberalism. "Let them do the work." "It's not our job." "It's just not

possible.” But if what we have said here is correct then we need to remain insistent. We must not give up until these “big players” contribute their fair share as well.