

OPEN PEER COMMENTARY

Self-Defense, Harm to Others, and Reasons for Action in Collective Action Problems

MARK BRYANT BUDOLFSON

Center for Ethics in Society, Stanford University, Stanford, California

Baatz's excellent discussion moves the debate forward in two ways that I will focus on here: first, by articulating an attractive view based on the notion of *what can reasonably be demanded* of individuals, and second, by providing a helpful overview of much of the existing literature.¹ In what follows I suggest three ways Baatz and others might further clarify and build on these contributions in future research.

1. Clarifying 'Reasonable Demands', and Integrating the Existing Literature on Distributing Burdens and Self-Defense

A central issue in climate ethics is 'where to draw the line' between permissible and impermissible individual emissions, and Baatz's idea is to use the notion of *what can reasonably be demanded* of individuals in order to draw this line. I believe that this is a fruitful idea, and is superior to most of the existing alternatives.

There are a number of different ways of giving this idea more precise content that merit further examination in future work, including several based on different views in the existing literature in normative ethics and political philosophy about how burdens should be distributed, and in particular about how a burden that would by default fall on an individual may be redistributed by that individual onto others depending on a variety of factors. The last issue is arguably the general philosophical issue behind the self-defense literature, and I focus on it in what follows in order to illustrate one way that integrating such theories into the discussion can also provide further insight into the details of reasonable demands for emissions reductions. With that in mind, consider a proposal:

Subsistence Emissions as Self-Defense Emissions: Emissions reductions can be reasonably demanded up to the point at which an individual can justify a refusal to make further reductions on grounds of **self-defense**. These remaining emissions might then be identified as 'subsistence emissions', giving more precise content to that familiar rhetorical notion.²

Correspondence Address: Mark Bryant Budolfson, Center for Ethics in Society, Stanford University 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, CA 94305. Email: budolfson@stanford.edu

With this idea in mind, many would argue that members of current and future generations who would be harmed via emissions are more analogous to *innocent bystanders* than to *threats* in the sense of the self-defense literature, and many would take this to show that individuals must reduce their emissions to zero because harm to innocent bystanders cannot then be justified even on grounds of self-defense.

The problem with this argument is that the large human population of the planet, including future generations, is one of the primary reasons why greenhouse gas emissions are harmful at all, rather than the good thing they would be in a less populated world. For this reason, there is a plausible argument that current and future generations are more analogous to threats than innocent bystanders, at least from the perspective of an individual who is asked to reduce emissions to zero to avoid imposing any harm on them. In particular, such an individual is more analogous to someone who finds herself trapped in a tiny house with a rapidly expanding population of people—so large and so rapidly expanding that she can save herself and escape only by imposing some amount of harm on them. In such a case, even if the others are innocent, imposing some amount of harm on them is justified on grounds of self-defense as long as it meets a proportionality constraint—for example, although it is not permissible to kill them all painfully in order to save herself, it is permissible to scratch each of their fingers in order to save herself. This is relevant to the ethics of climate change, because the harm imposed on others by even a high-emitting individual is more analogous to a wide distribution of *de minimis* harms such as scratching the finger of each person on the planet than it is to the killing of individual people.³

With all of that in mind, it appears that ‘subsistence emissions’ can be justified on grounds of self-defense, and it is also arguable that much more significant emissions by individuals can be justified on more general grounds of justified redistribution of burdens onto others in order to protect important aspects of one’s own well-being in a way that satisfies a proportionality constraint. In other words, there are well-motivated grounds here for an argument that it is not reasonable to demand of individuals in wealthy nations that they make significant sacrifices of well-being via burdensome emissions reductions given the lack of cooperation by others.

This provides a segue into the question of the next section about how exactly to understand the main conclusion of Baatz’s paper.

2. Clarifying the Main Conclusion and the Significance of Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory

At first glance, it might appear that Baatz takes his positive view to support a conclusion in line with the usual suspects who endorse the rhetoric of ‘a duty of individuals to reduce emissions’ and/or the importance of the distinction between ‘subsistence and luxury emissions’. However, I think this appearance is misleading. On further reflection, Baatz’s positive view seems to support (or at least is consistent with) two different conclusions—first:

Ideal Obligations Under Perfect Compliance: Under conditions of ‘perfect compliance’, individuals would be required to make significant emissions reductions even in the absence of effective global action to address climate change, partly because in such a scenario it would be reasonable to demand of them that they make

such reductions. Individuals would also be required to favor effective policy solutions to climate change. Call these the ‘ideal obligations’ of individuals with respect to climate change.

As we might say in ordinary language, the idea here is that if things were very different in the sense that everyone acted in much more cooperative way, then individuals *would* be required to act significantly differently than they actually do. Note that this claim does not imply that anyone is *actually* required to act significantly differently than they actually do. In fact, the second conclusion supported by (or at least consistent with) Baatz’s positive view seems to be the following:

Actual Obligations Given Imperfect Compliance: Given that most individuals are not complying with their ideal obligations and thereby increasing the costs to others of complying, it is not reasonable to demand of individuals that they make significant reductions and live up to ideal obligations; instead, individuals are only required to eliminate wasteful emissions and other emissions that benefit them in fairly trivial ways, because that is all that can be reasonably demanded of them given the actual costs of ideal compliance in light of the non-ideal behavior of others.⁴ Individuals are also required to favor effective policy solutions to climate change.

Although Baatz does not emphasize the point, this second conclusion is actually closer to Sinnott-Armstrong’s view⁵ than it is to those who typically speak of ‘a duty of individuals to reduce emissions’ and ‘subsistence vs. luxury emissions’. Furthermore, only the second conclusion is about what individuals are *actually* required to do—the first conclusion is merely a conclusion about what they *would* be required to do in some highly counterfactual scenario in which the entire world behaved in a very different way.⁶

3. Opportunities for Further Integration of the Existing Literature on Collective Action and Climate Ethics

I think Baatz mischaracterizes the dialectic between Sinnott-Armstrong and Nolt, Broome, and others.⁷ Contrary to what Baatz suggests, it is consistent for Sinnott-Armstrong to agree with Nolt, Broome, or anyone else about the *average effect* of an individual’s emissions, because Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument is that even if those calculations are correct, a single individual does not *cause* harm via her emissions, and so they are not impermissible via any plausible principle, deontological or otherwise, because facts about the average effect of such emissions are then for all practical purposes merely facts about the collective behavior and lack of political action of others, where that collective action of others is ‘not one’s own fault’. In sum, Sinnott-Armstrong’s view depends essentially on a claim about *causation* (that many will find implausible), and does not depend in any way on a claim about the *average effect* of an individual’s emissions.

With that in mind, my own view is that because Sinnott-Armstrong’s view about causation will be rejected by most commentators on climate change, the most important question in this area of the literature is whether there is a sound argument for the impermissibility of individual emissions if we agree with Nolt or Broome about the average effect of such emissions *and* assume that Sinnott-Armstrong’s claim about

causation is *mistaken*. In connection with this last issue, Broome's deontological argument about where to draw the line between permissible and impermissible individual emissions is of the utmost importance, and is arguably the best argument on offer for the conclusion that individuals are required to reduce their carbon footprints to zero. For that reason, I encourage others to evaluate it carefully in addition to the other work on climate ethics that Baatz discusses. My own view is that there is *not* a sound argument of that type even given those assumptions, because such arguments either depend essentially on an implausible extension of deontological principles such as a Millian harm principle to cases involving only *de minimis* effects on others, or depend on fallacious inferences about the permissibility of individual action based on the average effect of similar actions across society, or depend on other mistaken assumptions that I detail in other work.⁸

Notes

¹ Baatz, 'Climate change and individual duties to reduce GHG emissions'.

² Hyunseop Kim has suggested something like this in work in progress. My contribution is the reasoning that follows.

³ The example here involving a tiny house is inspired by Judith Jarvis Thomson's seminal discussion in 'A defense of abortion'. For a critical overview of the recent literature on self-defense, see Tyler Doggett, 'Recent work on the ethics of self-defense'.

⁴ The most precise statement Baatz offers is: 'In a first approximation, emission reductions "can reasonably be demanded" if an action generating GHG emissions either a) has no moral weight or b) an alternative course of action (that is to be considered as an adequate substitute) causing less emissions exists.' (From the section 'Conclusion'; see also Baatz's comments at the end of the last paragraph of the section 'The case of non-compliance'.)

⁵ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 'It's not my fault'.

⁶ I agree with the second conclusion here and I defend a single set of principles that I take to explain the ethics of collective action in my paper 'Collective action, climate change, and the ethical significance of futility'. More generally, I believe that such a single set of principles explain both ideal and non-ideal cases, that those principles are primarily illuminated by reflection on non-ideal cases, and thus that it is a mistake to believe that ideal theory has explanatory priority over non-ideal theory—on the contrary, only insofar as we have confidence in how to make the tradeoffs and compromises necessary in non-ideal cases can we have any confidence in intuitions about ideal cases. I also believe that Baatz's first conclusion is problematic because it implies that individuals could be required to make very costly emissions reductions even if such reductions were of no use in generating a desirable solution to climate change.

⁷ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 'It's not my fault'; John Nolt, 'How harmful are the average American's greenhouse gas emissions?'; and John Broome, *Climate Matters*.

⁸ I discuss these issues in greater detail in 'Collective action, climate change, and the ethical significance of futility'. It would also be fruitful to integrate more general work on the ethics of collective action into discussions of climate ethics—for example, Derek Parfit, Five mistakes in moral mathematics, in *Reasons and Persons*; Shelly Kagan, 'Do i make a difference?'; Julia Nefsky, 'Consequentialism and collective harm: a reply to Kagan'; and Mark Budolfson, 'The ethics of the marketplace and a surprisingly deep question for normative theory'.