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**Bearing the Weight of the World:  
On the Extent of an Individual's Environmental Responsibility**

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**ABSTRACT**

To what extent is any individual morally obligated to live environmentally sustainably? In answering this, I reject views I see as constituting two extremes. On one, it depends entirely on whether there exists a collective agreement; and if no such agreement exists, no one is obligated to reduce her/his consumption or pollution unilaterally. On the other, the lack of a collective agreement is morally irrelevant, and regardless of what others are doing, each person is obligated to limit her/his pollution and consumption to a level that would be sustainable if everyone were to act in this way. I argue that the truth is somewhere between these, but that a very precise specification of the extent of one's responsibility is impossible. Roughly, what can be said is that each individual ought constantly to strive to do more than she/he does currently and to push her/himself into new, uncomfortable territory.

**KEYWORDS**

tragedy of the commons, collective action, individual responsibility, ecological footprint, sustainable consumption

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# Bearing the Weight of the World: On the Extent of an Individual's Environmental Responsibility

## I. INTRODUCTION

I think of myself as an environmentally-conscientious person: I walk or bicycle to work, eat a vegetarian diet<sup>1</sup>, recycle zealously, practically never heat or air-condition my home, and more. It is, however, not my intention to boast. In fact, I want plainly to admit that it is certainly *not* the case that I perform every environmentally-friendly action I could. Thus, I often find myself wondering: Am I doing all that I ought to be? Is my environmental impact small enough as to satisfy the demands of morality? Now, I also wonder about how much businesses and governments should do to help promote a healthy environment. Questions about business and government, though, are not ones I will explicitly consider here—though some of what I argue may be relevant to them. Instead, this paper's central focus is on the actions of individual people. The primary question is: To what extent is an individual morally obligated to perform environmentally-friendly actions? In other words: At what point has an individual done what she/he ought, morally, in respect to the environment?

After motivating the question more fully, I will reject two ways of answering—views that I see as constituting two extremes. On one of these views, while we are morally obligated to act in accordance with established, sensible collective schemes that in practice require *many* people jointly to act in the environmentally-friendly way, we are not morally obligated to act in this way *unilaterally*—which is to say outside of a collective scheme, where one person's potentially-lone action has no meaningful impact. On the other view, even in the absence of a collective scheme, and so even in the absence of assurance that many other people would join in, each person is nonetheless morally obligated to act in a way that would be sustainable if everyone were to act in this way. The truth, I believe, is somewhere in the messy middle. I will argue that each

individual's moral obligation, roughly, is constantly to strive to do more than she/he does currently and to push her/himself into new, uncomfortable territory, but that no one is obligated to martyr her/himself for an environmental cause.

## II. SETTING UP THE QUESTION

The question about the extent of an individual's obligation to perform environmentally-friendly actions gets its full force only when one jointly recognizes four things.

First, the list of environmentally-friendly actions one could perform is incredibly long. One could: have a small family (even altogether abstaining from having children); drive less, and walk, bicycle, or take public transit more; live close to where you work; carpool; drive the most fuel-efficient vehicle possible, and keep it tuned up and leak free, and its tires properly inflated; minimize the number of miles you fly; eat a vegetarian diet, especially if your meat would have been from animals raised in resource-intensive ways (as most meat sold in stores and restaurants is); eat food that is local and organic; invest in the stock of only environmentally-responsible companies; buy products that are produced in an environmentally-responsible manner (e.g., those that are made from recycled materials, have minimal packaging, etc.); buy products that are extensively reusable; buy second-hand items (especially clothing and furniture) rather than new items; recycle (metal, glass, plastics, newspapers, mixed paper, cardboard, Styrofoam, old electronics, etc.); properly dispose of automotive oil, batteries, tires, household hazardous waste; avoid toxic or non-biodegradable products (paint, paint strippers, cleaning products, etc.); live in a small-sized dwelling; live in a region with a moderate climate; heat and cool your home minimally; ensure that your house is as energy efficient as possible (by, e.g., having plenty of insulation, doors that shut tightly, windows that are double-paned, and appliances that are

efficient, using compact fluorescent light bulbs and solar panels, turning lights and electronics off – possibly even unplugging electronics – when you are not using them, and buying renewable energy from your power company); renovate (flooring, cabinetry, countertops, etc.) using sustainable materials; take short showers; do not flush every time you go to the bathroom; do not wash clothes, towels, sheets, etc., unless they are genuinely sufficiently dirty; use a manual lawn mower; avoid synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. The list could go on.<sup>2</sup>

Second, many of these behaviors involve some cost to the individual engaging in them. Consider, first, monetary costs. As an example, buying “green” products – organic food or clothes, say – often requires paying more than one would for the “conventional” alternative. Fixing an oil leak in one’s car can also be expensive. Some environmentally-friendly purchases will save the consumer money in the long run. Energy-efficient products are the obvious example: a more efficient refrigerator, dual-pane windows, home insulation, etc. Often, though, these will cost more *up front*—a nontrivial fact for people whose bank account is thin enough to make it difficult to do what will pay for itself (say) a decade later. Other costs are non-monetary. Some environmentally-friendly actions involve making extra effort (e.g., bringing hazardous household waste to the appropriate municipal facility), enduring some inconvenience (e.g., walking rather than driving), or sacrificing some comfort (e.g., not air conditioning one’s home on a hot day) or some enjoyment (e.g., not making a lovely sight-seeing drive). Sometimes these actions can actually save one money, but they count as costs overall when, in the individual’s eyes, what is lost (comfort, convenience, etc.) outweighs the benefit of saving some money.

Third, the fact that the environmentally-friendly action is costly (in one or more of the aforementioned senses) means that many people – not all people, of course, but many people – will not actually perform the action unless required, or at least strongly pressured, to do so.

Fourth, the aforementioned kinds of actions have no noticeable impact unless they are consistently being performed by many people. Environmental problems are, in other words, collective-action problems. I might refrain from taking a jet ski<sup>3</sup> onto a local lake so that I do not contribute to the pollution of the lake; but if everyone else who would normally go jet skiing there does so just the same, the effect of my refraining fails to register. Any test of the lake's water quality will produce the same results as if I had joined in the fun. Relatedly, if no one else is performing some particular environmentally-unfriendly action, the environment is not made worse off in any appreciable way by one single person doing so. So, if I alone jet ski, a test of the lake's water quality will come back the same as if no one *at all* jet skied. These two related points hold in respect to every one of the possible environmentally-friendly actions I listed earlier—and especially when impacts are assessed on a large scale.

The difficulty is now apparent. Given how many environmentally-beneficial actions one could conceivably perform, that so many of these involve a cost to the individual performing them, that many people thus have incentive not to perform them, and that whether or not one individual performs an action does not have any noticeable effect on the environment, it is far from clear how many such actions one is actually morally obligated to perform.

### III. SOME BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Every argument depends on at least one claim whose truth is simply granted at the outset.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, there are several claims on which my argument depends but for which I will not rigorously argue.

First, I will take for granted that morality makes demands of us—including, sometimes, demands that we do not welcome. For example, much as I might like my neighbor's vintage

electric guitar that is autographed by Jimi Hendrix, it would be morally wrong for me to steal it. This act is prohibited not just by the law, but also by morality. Morality also generally forbids killing innocents, defrauding, lying, breaking promises, committing adultery, and so on—even where I might want to do such a thing.<sup>5</sup> This seems to me uncontroversial; and this paper is not addressed to those who disagree. It is not addressed to those who reject the very idea of moral obligation, or those who believe their moral obligation is simply to do whatever they most desire to do.

Second, I will take for granted the view that we can have moral obligations in respect to the environment. It seems plain, for example, that one who for fun fed poison to endangered California condors or dynamited Delicate Arch in Arches National Park would have acted immorally in doing so. And it is not just in acting, but also in refraining from acting, that one can fall short of one's moral obligations in respect to the environment. For example, one who sat idly by when she/he could have easily prevented millions of gallons of crude oil from spilling into the ocean did not live up to her/his moral duties. These claims seem obviously true.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, I am simply going to assume that normative ethical issues are ones it makes sense to discuss and in respect to which it makes sense to offer philosophical arguments. The question, "What is morally required?" is alas not settled in the way the question, "What is the temperature in the room?" is settled—namely by waving a scientific instrument through the air. But answers to the former kind of question, no less than those to the latter, can be supported with reasons and evidence. "What is morally required?" is thus also different from "What flavor of ice cream is tastiest?" Where people disagree about which flavor of ice cream is tastiest, there is little to no room for persuasion based in reasoned discussion, whereas philosophical

argumentation is appropriate in trying to resolve normative moral questions. Not all philosophers agree with this, but it is something I will take for granted here.

#### IV. ONE WRONG ANSWER

One of the most provocative answers to the question of the extent of an individual's moral obligation in respect to the environment comes from Baylor Johnson (2003). Johnson rejects what he calls the "Kantian" principle that "every commons user ought, morally, to restrict her or his use to a level that would be sustainable if all other users reduced their use in a similar way, and to do this regardless of what others do" (ibid.: 272). He argues instead that "one's moral obligation is [only] to work for [the establishment of] a collective scheme to protect the commons" and to "adhere to" this once it is in place (ibid.: 272). As I will explain in the next section of the paper, I agree that the Kantian principle – which constitutes what I call one of two extremes – should be rejected. This does not, however, lead me to endorse Johnson's alternative—which I count, frankly, as at the extreme other end of the spectrum. In this section, I detail the problems I see in Johnson's account.

Johnson interchangeably uses "collective agreement" and "cooperative scheme" to refer broadly to arrangements wherein a large number of actors are more or less required to behave in a certain way. Familiar environmental examples, he says, "might be green taxes, laws that regulate emissions, or treaties like the Montreal Protocol pledging nations to limit emissions of ozone-depleting chemicals" (ibid.: 274). To me, the *paradigmatic* example is the reasonably widespread requirement that automobile owners have their vehicles tested on a regular schedule for smog-producing emissions. In theory, the law sets permissible emissions to such a level that if each individual were in compliance there would be no serious problem of smog; and if a

vehicle is not in compliance, its owner must have it repaired. In this context, Johnson's view – I believe – would be: (1) when such a requirement has been officially established, individuals are morally obligated (as well, of course, as legally obligated) to abide by its terms; and (2) if no such requirement existed, individuals would be morally obligated to work to establish it officially; but (3) if the requirement has not been officially established, no individual is morally obligated to ensure that her/his vehicle is not emitting large amounts of smog-related pollutants.

Johnson does, however, “qualify” his conclusion. He says that by making unilateral reductions, one might “severely deprive oneself, or other innocent people who depend upon one, and [these actions] may... become a substitute for organizing efforts,” but if “they do not have these consequences, individual reductions are surely morally permissible, and perhaps even praiseworthy as supererogatory actions” (ibid.: 285). He also notes that there are “at least three good reasons to undertake such unilateral reductions in one's own use of an overburdened commons” (ibid.: 285). First, because they are concrete and immediate, making unilateral reductions may lead one to feel good. Second, an individual who makes the unilateral reduction acts as a kind of pioneer whose efforts reveal what works and what is possible. Third, making a unilateral change may be necessary in order to avoid the charge of hypocrisy when one organizes to establish a collective scheme. (Johnson does not believe that one would genuinely *be* hypocritical for, e.g., promoting the establishment of an automotive emissions test requirement without unilaterally ensuring that one's own car is not an excessive emitter. He does, however, recognize that this may well bring *accusations* of hypocrisy that would undermine one's prospects for successful organizing.) Relatedly, he allows that making individual reductions may set an example for others—though he is pessimistic about the chances that this example will inspire to action a sufficient number of others as to make an overall difference.



Nonetheless, Johnson maintains that unilateral actions are never obligatory. He does acknowledge that “It isn’t right... to follow a mob to do evil, and deeply engrained social practices can be morally wrong – slavery, for example – and it is the responsibility of individuals to resist the common wisdom and the material temptation, and to take the right stand however lonely and however costly it may be” (ibid.: 276). He does not, however, believe this carries over to individual actions in the context of the environment. He says that “The only reason to adopt unilateral restraint... is to avert a [tragedy of the commons]. So if unilateral restraint cannot reasonably be expected to achieve its purpose, there is no reason, and hence no moral reason, to adopt it” (ibid.: 277). On one occasion he says that in respect to big environmental problems, “no individual’s use of the commons is harmful” (ibid.: 278). This, he notes, is what makes, e.g., driving a gas-guzzling car different from, say, murder and lying: an act of murder harms, and lying (at least) often does so, whereas no matter how big a guzzler the vehicle is, no meaningful harm is done through the driving of it.<sup>7</sup> This claim is echoed by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, who says that driving “a gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicle... on sunny Sunday afternoons... just for fun... does not cause harm in normal cases.” (2005: 288-9). The point is also made in respect to *helping*. Sinnott-Armstrong considers the possibility that “I have no moral obligation to contribute to famine relief because the famine will continue and people will die whether or not I donate my money to a relief agency”; but such reasoning is flawed, he replies, because “I could help a certain individual if I gave my donation directly to that individual” (ibid.: 291). It is, however, more compelling in the environmental context, since “if I refrain from driving for fun on this one Sunday, there is no individual who will be helped in the least” (ibid.: 291).

There are, of course, numerous possible objections to this. Johnson himself actually considers one, which goes as follows:

Suppose people can throw a pebble onto a pile building up on an innocent person. No individual's pebble harms the person, but if enough people cast a stone, in aggregate they will crush him to death. If each person acts independently, then just as in the commons case, no person's restraint controls the aggregate amount and no one's unilateral restraint can reasonably be supposed to prevent (or contribute to the prevention of) the harm. If my reasoning about the commons is correct would it not follow, contrary to our ordinary moral intuitions, that no one has an obligation to refrain from stoning the victim? (2003: 278)

Naturally, Johnson believes he has a satisfactory reply. He says that in respect to the average environmental problem: (1) a person who draws on the commons at an unsustainable level stands to benefit considerably from doing so and would lose appreciably from refraining; (2) when a person refrains from unsustainable use of the commons, she/he in effect makes it easier for others to increase their use; and (3) "there is no collective agreement to prevent the aggregate harm by individual acts of restraint" (ibid.: 279). Johnson argues that while the pebble-casting case may or may not match the first two characteristics, it does not match the third. "It seems clear to me," he says, "that in the pebble case we have already a collective agreement that one should, other things being equal, refrain from actions that will contribute to the harm or death of other innocent parties. Thus we have a collective agreement that one should, other things being equal, refrain from casting pebbles onto the pile" (ibid.: 281).

I find the objection itself quite powerful, and see multiple problems in Johnson's reply. First, if – as Johnson seems to believe – the agreement not to cast pebbles onto the pile is not *sui generis*, and instead falls out of a broader agreement to refrain from actions that contribute to the harm or death of innocent persons, then an agreement not to perform environmentally-unfriendly

actions plainly also falls out. Now, I am entirely willing to go along with Johnson when he says that one individual's environmentally-unfriendly actions do not by themselves harm. For example, when I consume energy (even of a non-renewable sort) by air-conditioning my home, or drive my car (without crashing it into anyone), or send a recyclable bottle to a landfill, I am not harming anyone. Clearly, though, pollution can harm, and so, too, can deprivation of access to important resources; so when I perform the aforementioned environmentally-unfriendly actions, I am certainly *contributing* to a harm. Not everything that contributes to a harm actually harms, just as not everything that contributes to a tasty dish is tasty (think: pepper, all by itself). But an action can contribute to a harm even if the action is neither necessary nor sufficient for the harm. Consider this example from Sinnott-Armstrong: "Imagine that it takes three people to push a car off a cliff with a passenger locked inside, and five people are already pushing. If I join and help them push, then my act of pushing is neither necessary nor sufficient to make the car go off the cliff. Nonetheless, my act of pushing is a cause (or part of the cause) of the harm to the passenger" (2005: 289). When the car goes over the cliff, the passenger is surely harmed, and if one joins in as a sixth pusher, one has certainly contributed to that harm. So, in short, if the agreement not to be one of many who piles a pebble on the helpless person is part of or entailed by a general agreement not to harm or to contribute to a harm, then Johnson should say that behaving in environmentally-unfriendly ways is prohibited by the same general agreement.<sup>8</sup>

Second, it is surely not simply on account of a pre-existing agreement that it is morally wrong to toss your pebble onto the pile. The point is perhaps easiest to see in the context, again, of Sinnott-Armstrong's car-pushing example. Johnson would no doubt say that we should not join in to push the occupied car over the cliff, and he would presumably say that this is because we have made some prior "collective agreement that one should, other things being equal, refrain

from actions that will contribute to the harm or death of other innocent parties”—as joining in pushing them over the cliff would. However, suppose we had not made such an agreement. Would it then really be permissible to join in the pushing? At least in ordinary circumstances, it plainly would not.<sup>9</sup> The same is true in the pebble-tossing case. The agreement – even if it exists – is clearly not as important as Johnson suggests. Even if there is no collective agreement not to contribute to the harm of innocent persons by performing environmentally-unfriendly actions, it is at least an open question whether doing so is wrong. The mere fact that there is no agreement in the environmental case – supposing this to be a fact – would not entail that there is nothing morally wrong with contributing to a harm by performing environmentally-unfriendly actions.

Johnson says that “If and when a cooperative scheme to avoid a commons problem is in place, failure to adhere to it would normally be a form of free riding—an attempt to enjoy the benefits of others’ sacrifices while avoiding one’s own fair share of them” (2003: 272). But – as an extension of my second point, above – surely free-riding can occur, and count as wrong, even outside of a formal cooperative scheme. Consider an apartment complex where every two weeks a paid employee scoops leaves out of the swimming pool. However, leaves accumulate in the pool quickly. There is no collective agreement that residents will scoop out leaves; in fact, the formal pre-existing agreement stipulates that the complex employee will do so. Nonetheless, imagine that I recognize the need, and so take the net and do some cleaning. Another tenant – one with whom I have never spoken – sees me doing so and the next day takes a turn of her own. The next day, another tenant – again, without any communication – takes a turn; and so on. A dozen tenants join in, but there is still nothing official about this scheme. There is, however, one person who swims every day, but who would not do so if there were leaves in the pool, and who knows both that other residents have informally started taking turns doing some cleaning and that

without this there would be many leaves in the pool, but who never takes a turn cleaning. This person is free-riding, and is morally derelict. Again, this shows that Johnson is trying to get too much leverage out of the notion of a pre-existing agreement or formal cooperative scheme.

Further evidence of this comes from Johnson's (quick) discussion of voting. Voting parallels the pebble-tossing and the environmental cases in important ways. That citizens living in democracies ought to vote is uncontroversial.<sup>10</sup> This is true despite the fact that no major election is going to be decided by a single vote. (This is increasingly certain as one moves from an election within a small organization to the level of the city, county, state, and nation.) So, there is no individual whose vote is going to make a difference to the outcome of the election. On what grounds, then, can Johnson maintain that citizens in a democracy ought to vote? He says: "Individual, voluntary efforts [in respect to the environment]... contribute merely a drop in the bucket, and we deceive ourselves when we think of them as analogous to the small contributions we make when we vote... Voting has a point because it is part of a collective effort" (ibid.: 285). This is essentially all he says; but it is surely inadequate to establish that the analogy to voting is problematic. Voting is, we can concede, part of a collective effort, if that means just that many people make the needed effort to cast a vote, and believe that it is important to do so. But a considerable number of people also make an effort to reduce their environmental impacts. No one would balk if I claimed that recycling, say, or buying organic food, is "part of a collective effort." These things are not, however, formally required; and neither is voting. I thus cannot see grounds for saying, as Johnson does, that one has a moral responsibility to vote but not to perform even a single environmentally-friendly action outside of a collective scheme.

In addition to failing to explain what is wrong with being one of many individuals who sets a pebble onto the helpless person or with failing to vote in a large-scale election, Johnson's argument is actually self-defeating. Again, while maintaining that we are not morally obligated to make unilateral reductions in our environmental impact, Johnson argues that we *are* morally obligated to work to establish collective schemes. However, the reasons that tell against the former tell equally against the latter. Johnson considers and rejects this charge. He says that "organising efforts do not face the most intractable features of a [tragedy of the commons]. In particular no one can misappropriate the benefits of one's organising efforts in the way that one party can appropriate the resources saved by another forebearance in a commons" (ibid.: 284). He adds that "Even more importantly, in a [tragedy of the commons] game the possibilities of communication between users are, by definition, limited to decisions to increase or reduce use of the commons" whereas "organising efforts face no such artificial limits on communication" (ibid.: 284). In my judgment, however, these differences are not that significant. The features of a tragedy of the commons scenario that Johnson's case really rests on are present in the context of working to establish a collective scheme, namely: there are many possible collective agreements, and fixing our environmental problems will require many actual collective agreements, not just one; doing so is costly (requiring both time and, in almost every case, money); most people will not perform this work; and it takes the work of many people to get even a single a collective scheme in place (so that one individual's efforts will be fruitless if no one else is working on this and needless if many others are working on it). And here, Johnson's aforementioned tack of locating moral reasons in the terms of a pre-existing agreement will unquestionably not work. There is not a pre-existing collective agreement to work to establish collective agreements; and even if there were, the problem could then just be pushed up a level.

(To avoid an infinite regress, at *some point* reasons to work to establish a collective agreement must be located outside of a pre-existing agreement.)

Now, as I will explain in the next section, I cannot get on board with what we have dubbed the Kantian principle in the context of environmentally-friendly actions. That said, to me it is now plain that the absence of a collective agreement does not entirely excuse one from the moral obligation to perform environmentally-friendly actions. Any sensible account of our moral obligations will need to make room for non-consequentialist reasons for acting. Johnson's does not do so. As noted above, he says that "The only reason to adopt unilateral restraint... is to avert a [tragedy of the commons]. So if unilateral restraint cannot reasonably be expected to achieve its purpose, there is no reason, and hence no moral reason, to adopt it" (ibid.: 277). This omits so much. There are plainly non-consequentialist reasons for voting (even where the election will turn out no differently than if you had not voted) and for refraining from joining others in putting your pebble on the pile or in pushing the car over the cliff (even where the innocent person will die just as certainly as if you had set your pebble on him or helped push the car); and I will argue that there are similar reasons for performing environmentally-friendly actions unilaterally.

I have always been sympathetic to Joel Feinberg's (1970) argument about the "expressive function" of punishment—and have also always taken it to be relevant in many additional contexts. Feinberg acknowledges that "the relation of the expressive function of punishment to its central purposes" – in short, deterrence and retribution – "is not always easy to trace" (ibid.: 101), but maintains that the story of what justifies punishment is incomplete if talk of its expressive function is omitted. He says that when society punishes wrongdoers, citizens thereby symbolically deny participation or acquiescence in the criminal act, and are thereby able to escape responsibility for it or be absolved from blame for it. Feinberg adds that "At its best, in

civilized and democratic countries, punishment surely expresses the community's strong disapproval of what the criminal did" (ibid.: 100). In fact, it "generally expresses more than judgments of disapproval; it is also a symbolic way of getting back at the criminal, or expressing a kind of vindictive resentment" (ibid.: 100). It tells the world that the criminal had no right to behave as she/he did and that her/his government does not condone this; and it emphatically reaffirms that the violated statute retains its character as law, and thus erases doubts about whether the law means what it says (ibid.: 101-3). These are, as it were, messages that punishment communicates or symbolizes. The importance of such communication or symbolization constitutes a reason for punishing.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, this generally applies to voting, too. One key reason to vote consists in the message one communicates by doing so. By voting, one voices one's support for a governmental system in which power ultimately is vested in and exercised by citizens, as well as for those representatives or policies one judges to be best. If one votes because one believes that one's vote makes a difference to who is elected or what measure is approved, one mistakes one's level of influence. When I vote, it is instead largely due to the symbolic and communicative significance of doing so. The same kinds of considerations are also relevant in the pebble-laying and car-pushing cases. In both, the innocent person is going to die whether or not one joins in; but refraining expresses that one is not complicit, symbolically cleanses one's hands of blood, and thus liberates one from guilt by association.

By the same token, performing environmentally-friendly actions unilaterally plainly has an extremely important symbolic, expressive function. When one makes the decision to live close to where one works, one proclaims that one is not complicit in the harm (in the form of polluted air, a changed climate, etc.) that results when many people engage in long commutes.



By, say, biking to work, one declares one's repudiation of lifestyles built around the rapacious, unsustainable consumption of fossil fuels. By eschewing meat, one engages in a form of protest – important more for what it symbolizes than for what it accomplishes – against the wastefulness and pollution of factory farms, and indeed against a view of animals as resources existing simply for humans' benefit. By setting one's recycling bin out for pickup each week, one expresses one's disapproval of wastefulness, and symbolically announces that one cares about the future of the planet (including all those people who will dwell on it). By doing nothing in respect to recycling one communicates the opposite message. And if one works for the establishment of a recycling-related collective scheme but prior to its establishment does not actually recycle, one at best communicates a mixed message.

Now, all the examples just mentioned are ones where the performance or non-performance of the act is not private. Others see my recycling bin on the curb or see that it is not there. They see me biking to work, or driving there. And they at least sometimes see me eating meat or refraining from doing so. What work can the notion of actions' expressive or symbolic function do when the actions are more private—as, for example, adding insulation to your attic is? Here, one may be affirming something to members of one's family—perhaps children in the family, most importantly; but even if one is not doing that, it is important that by performing the action one is affirming something to oneself.

All of this, but especially the idea of affirming something to oneself, relates closely to integrity. Everyone takes integrity to be a virtue. As Marion Hourdequin (2010) has noted, integrity and integration are related notions: to be a person of integrity is, roughly, to be a person whose values and behaviors are integrated, or in other words, harmonize. There are many ways one might lack integrity. As Hourdequin correctly observes, one of these is to value a healthy

environment – e.g., clean air, large thriving forests, unpolluted oceans, etc. – but not to act in ways that reflect this value. If I value a healthy environment but do not recycle, bicycle, turn down the heat in my house, reduce/eliminate meat in my diet, etc. unless there is a collective agreement requiring this of everyone, my integrity is compromised. This is true, in fact, even if I am working to establish collective agreements (as opposed to doing *nothing* that is environmentally friendly), since in this case, quite plainly – as Hourdequin notes – my actions at the personal and political levels are not integrated.

Though important, appeals to integrity can alas only do so much work. Integrity demands that values and actions harmonize, but – at least as characterized by Hourdequin – it does not say much about what the values themselves ought to be. If I perform no environmentally-friendly actions, but also care nothing about a healthy environment, it is not clear that my integrity is thereby implicated. And so the question of how much morality requires me to do stays open. Ronald Sandler (2010) has argued that environmental ethicists should be much more oriented toward virtue ethics, and no doubt he is right that thinking in terms of virtues is useful. It is, however, not enough. I want to know how much in the way of environmentally-friendly actions is morally required of me, and thinking about the virtues will always leave that question open to a very large degree. So, too, alas, will talk of expressive functions, symbolic significance, and so on. They do, though – as I have made clear – at least push us away from Johnson’s account.

## V. ANOTHER WRONG ANSWER

According to the argument in the previous section, Johnson’s position – which I said constituted one of two extremes – is wrong. Each individual has moral reasons to make unilateral reductions in her/his consumption and pollution. These reasons are strong enough that, at least

sometimes, it is wrong not to make the unilateral reduction. This does not mean, however, that the view constituting the other extreme is the correct one. According to this view, the fact that environmental problems are collective-action problems, and that many people will not join you in performing the environmentally-friendly action, in no way excuses you from doing so unilaterally. On this view, which we might reasonably call Kantian, you are morally obligated to act in a sustainable manner regardless of what others are doing. Or, to put it slightly differently, even where no collective scheme is in place, you are morally obligated to act as you would be required if the collective agreement existed.

What is the problem with this view? Recall from earlier that Johnson claimed that environmental problems share the following three characteristics: (1) a person who draws on the commons at an unsustainable level stands to benefit considerably from doing so and would lose appreciably from refraining; (2) when a person refrains from unsustainable use of the commons, she/he in effect makes it easier for others to increase their use; and (3) “there is no collective agreement to prevent the aggregate harm by individual acts of restraint.” Again, Johnson has maintained that his argument does not entail that putting one’s pebble on the pile is permissible because that kind of case does not fit the third of those characteristics. I have argued that this is unconvincing. The first of those features, though, may be able to do more work. In the pebble case, individuals probably do not stand to benefit considerably from putting their pebble on the pile and would not lose significantly by refraining. The same is true in respect to helping to push the car off the cliff and to voting. Were this different, though – that is, were there a very high cost associated with holding back one’s pebble, or abstaining from helping to push the car, or voting – then it would not be nearly so obvious that one is morally obligated to do these things.

Usefully, Johnson asks us to consider the following:

Suppose... that individuals stand to gain significantly from tossing pebbles, or to lose significantly by abstaining. Suppose, for example, that the local dictator threatens to imprison or kill those who refuse to participate... In such a case it is obviously less likely that many individuals will abstain unilaterally thereby saving the victim... [T]he victim is likely to be killed no matter what the individual chooses. In this event, whereas I would admire the moral courage of a person who nevertheless refused to participate in the stoning... I would also tend to excuse those who participated. That is, my judgment would be harsher toward someone who threw on a stone when she could have refrained at little or no cost, than it would be for someone who threw a stone knowing that her restraint could not reasonably be expected to save the victim, while it would result in grave harm to her. (2003: 280)

This is a reasonable point; and it has significant consequences for our discussion. I recently completed an “ecological footprint” inventory.<sup>12</sup> The results indicated that if everyone on the planet lived like I do, we would need just over three Earths to sustain us! In order to satisfy the Kantian requirement, I would need to reduce my impact very significantly. As I said in my introduction, though, I think of myself as *already* behaving in a many significant environmentally-friendly ways. Plainly, then, getting my footprint down to what the Kantian approach requires would take a rather monumental effort. Running my air conditioner and heater as little as I do already impinges considerably on my quality of life. Doing all that I would need to do to reduce my footprint from “three Earths” to “one Earth” would almost certainly diminish my quality of life in a very serious way. It would seemingly be inconvenient and expensive— involving actions ranging from ensuring that much more of my food is local and organic, to

installing solar panels on my house, perhaps all the way to eliminating trips to visit my parents and siblings (who live about 2000 miles from me). Now, if everyone else were committed to similarly reducing their impacts, I would be more willing to do so; and perhaps it would then even be immoral for me not to. But I am not obligated to martyr myself alone, when my serious sacrifice would be for naught—as it would be given how few other people<sup>13</sup> are, or would be, willing to live in a way that approaches a footprint as small as “one Earth.”

As I said in the previous section, that one will make a difference is not the only reason one could have for acting; there are plainly meaningful non-consequentialist reasons for refraining from putting one’s pebble on the prostrate innocent person, even if one’s pebble would be far from necessary or sufficient for bringing about harm or death to this person. That is not to say, though, that these reasons are infeasible. So, if enough other people are certainly going to cast their pebble onto the pile that this individual is going to die regardless of what I do with my pebble, and there are *very* serious negative consequences for me if I hold back my pebble, then it is implausible to say that I should not – i.e., that it would be seriously wrong of me to – put my pebble on the pile. Similarly, I have meaningful non-consequentialist reasons for refraining from, as it were, putting my consumption and pollution “on the pile,” even if my consumption and pollution would be far from necessary or sufficient for causing environmental harm. But these reasons are not infeasible; and they are annulled or overridden specifically in cases where the environmentally-friendly actions become – as they certainly can – sufficiently burdensome.

## VI. THE MIDDLE WAY

The critical question at this stage is: How substantial does the sacrifice to one’s own welfare need to be before the non-consequentialist reasons for performing the environmentally-

friendly unilateral actions are defeated? Alas, it is very difficult to specify, in general, with any high degree of exactness. There are too many variables to be able to say, e.g., that one ought to perform 117 environmentally-friendly unilateral actions, or that one ought unilaterally to devote 23% of one's income to environmentally-friendly purchases/investments, or anything of this sort. Instead, I believe it is most illuminating to proceed via a handful of analogies. In athletic training, one can generally be sure one is not exercising in a sufficiently vigorous way if there is no strain or pain involved; and, by the same token, one is doing too much if one exercises so hard as to cripple oneself. In education, if one does not push oneself to the point of discomfort – of being tired, and of confronting claims that are hard to understand and/or challenge one's longstanding commitments – one is not doing enough; but one is doing too much if one studies to the point where one emotionally collapses or forsakes all one's other projects and relationships. In employment, if one never works hard enough to be tired or stressed, and never thinks about one's job-related responsibilities when one is home in the evening, one is not doing enough; but if one works so hard that one never sees one's children or gives oneself terrible ulcers, one is doing too much. In parenting, if one is never willing to be inconvenienced by driving one's child somewhere or getting out of bed at night when one's child has a nightmare, one is not doing enough; but if one instantly drops what one is doing, no matter how personally important, every time one's child faintly requests it, then one is going further than one is obligated.

The analogies are imperfect, but are important nonetheless. They demonstrate several things. First, there are many kinds of cases in which we lack a very precise formula for determining whether we are doing as much as we ought to be—and, in fact, we are not especially surprised or disturbed by the lack of such a formula in those cases. In light of this, our inability

to fix an exact extent to which we ought to perform environmentally-friendly actions should not be viewed as especially disappointing, and indeed the initial suspicion that we might be able to specify precisely how much we are morally obligated to do in the environmental context looks somewhat naïve. Second, what we can reasonably say, in so many kinds of cases in life, is that one is not expected to be as fully devoted to an end as one could possibly be, but one is plainly not doing enough if one stays entirely within the realm of comfort and convenience. So, *prima facie*, it is sensible to think the same is true of our duties in respect to the environment.

There arises at this point a question about the degree of subjectivity in my account. Plainly, the same action will not necessarily always strike two people as equally taxing. However, this does not mean that the account is therefore thoroughly subjective. Let us return to the exercise example. A five-mile run is a breeze for some people, and for others it would be brutal. But if someone says that taking one 15 minute walk a day is too arduous, we are generally incredulous. If this is indeed too arduous, it means that that the individual is very unhealthy. Similarly, for some people there is little discomfort or inconvenience in biking to work or installing solar panels on their home. For others, though, this will be much more taxing. This degree of subjectivity does not particularly concern me. Indeed, it leaves room for us to say, as, for example, Lucie Middlemiss (2010) has, that what exactly one's environmental obligations are turns to some degree on one's financial means and life circumstances. However, if someone says that the effort associated with recycling is enough to make her/him uncomfortable and thus is all she/he is obligated to do, she/he is either exaggerating or lazy. For the majority of us, whose recyclables are picked up at the curb outside our house, recycling is simply not cumbersome (physically or financially). As for those things which do involve discomfort, it is also relevant to note that, as with so many other things in life, the more you perform various environmentally-

friendly actions, the more accustomed to these you become, and the less uncomfortable doing them seems. Carpooling to work and eating less meat are examples. Finally, we must recognize that not everything that seems like a burden truly is. As Chrisoula Andreou (2010) has explained, ample psychological research has shown that so much of our environmentally-taxing material consumption fails to contribute significantly to our happiness.

So, I finally return to my initial question: Is my environmental impact small enough as to satisfy the demands of morality? I do not do all that I could—but it is not my obligation to do so. On the other hand, there are many environmentally-friendly actions I perform unilaterally, and I have strong non-consequentialist reasons for doing so. So, I am in that messy middle, which, in general, is where I should be. Indeed, I do enough as to involve some discomfort and inconvenience. However, much of what once seemed to me quite taxing is now practically second nature. I have settled into a routine, and my obligation is to strive further and challenge myself anew. I am not failing egregiously, but there is more I can do without seriously sacrificing my well-being. The crawlspace of my house is ready for insulation, and local organic farmers are ready for more of my business! It is time to stop talking and take action.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> That a vegetarian diet is environmentally friendly will perhaps not be obvious to every reader. For an excellent account of the adverse environmental impacts of the livestock/meat industry, see Ilea, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Several years ago, the *New York Times* ran a story about a family – the Conlin-Beavans – in New York City who undertook a year-long “no-impact” experiment. During this time the family went so far as to avoid using toilet paper! (See Green, 2007.) The undertaking was captured on film and later released as a documentary. (See Gabbert and Schein, 2009.)

<sup>3</sup> Technically, Jet Ski is a brand name, but I am following the custom of using it as a general term for what are more properly called “personal watercraft.”

<sup>4</sup> If each premise must be supported, and the supporting claims must all be supported, and the claims supporting the supporting claims all require support, and so on, there arises an obvious regress problem, and a burden no argument can overcome.

<sup>5</sup> Now, whether it is *sometimes* morally permissible to lie, or to break a promise, to steal, etc., is an open question. (Lying to the Nazis at the door or stealing medicine for one’s terribly-ill child when the alternative is the child’s death definitely do not seem to me to be morally monstrous.) In any case, my point is simply that in these realms there are certain things we are morally required to do, and certain others that we might want to do but are nonetheless morally forbidden from doing.

<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, what I have not committed myself to – and what I hope not to have to commit myself to, in order that this remains an article-length treatment of this topic – is a position on the precise *source* of our moral obligations. I believe I can reasonably maintain that morality makes demands of us – in regard to stealing, and killing people, and at least some environmental behavior – without myself needing to give a full account of where morality “comes from.” I also aspire to stay neutral regarding who/what properly counts as a direct object of moral concern. Some environmental philosophers may maintain that all of our obligations in regard to our environmental impact are in fact obligations to other people—insofar as the environmental consequences of our actions redound to affect people’s health, happiness, and peace of mind. Other theorists put stock in the principle of equal consideration of interests, and adding to it the claim that at least certain nonhuman entities or aggregates – be they individual

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animals, individual plants, whole species, whole ecosystems, or whatever – have interests, hold in turn that our duties are not all simply duties to other humans. For what it is worth, I certainly believe that we have obligations to sentient animals – obligations not to torture them, at least – and this belief seems to me relatively easy to defend; but nothing I say in this paper should crucially depend on the truth of this belief. All one needs to accept, here at the outset, is that how many natural resources one consumes and how much pollution one produces is not irrelevant from the moral point of view.

<sup>7</sup> Assuming, of course, that it is not crashed into someone.

<sup>8</sup> It is hardly worth mentioning, I think, that if the claim were instead to be that there is a *sui generis* agreement not to be one of many people who put a pebble on a pile on top of an innocent person, this would be implausible on its face.

<sup>9</sup> A case where someone is holding a gun to your head demanding that you help push is not an ordinary case; and this connects up to what I will discuss in the next section of the paper.

<sup>10</sup> In any case, it is one of those claims whose truth I am simply going to take for granted for the sake of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> I do not insist that it is an always-overriding reason, but it is a powerful reason nonetheless.

<sup>12</sup> A number of these are available online, but the one I used is at <http://www.myfootprint.org>, and is hosted by the Center for Sustainable Economy.

<sup>13</sup> Or at least so few people in the “developed” world.

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