Jet Travel and Desert

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Jet aircraft produce large quantities of greenhouse gases when in operation, so one way for an agent to reduce her individual greenhouse gas emissions is by reducing the extent to which she flies. Some groups have encouraged agents to give up on flying for life by committing to a "travel pledge". I argue here that, for many agents, it is morally impermissible to commit to a lifelong travel pledge, because in doing so, they would prevent themselves from receiving what they deserve. Most agents who commit to such a pledge exercise a great deal of virtue, and therefore deserve to have their lives go better, while also making a significant sacrifice, thus ensuring that their lives go worse. Because a single person's travel pledge cannot make a significant difference to the progress of climate change, the morally desirable effects of such a pledge are outweighed by the morally undesirable effects on desert.

Keywords: climate change; flight; travel; desert; altruism

Introduction

Jet aircraft produce large quantities of greenhouse gases when in operation. One way for an agent to reduce her individual greenhouse gas emissions, therefore, is to reduce the extent to which she travels by plane. The most dramatic reduction can be achieved by avoiding flight altogether, and some activists have argued that this is precisely what concerned members of the public ought to do. Contra these activists, my primary concern in this paper is to argue that – for many real agents, in realistic sets of circumstances – it is *morally impermissible* to commit oneself to avoiding flight in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Although issues specifically related to flight have not attracted much attention in the philosophical literature on climate change,[1] I take it that this conclusion is nevertheless likely to be a surprising one. There is a more general literature on the question of whether individuals are morally obligated to take steps to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, and in that literature it typically seems to be assumed that taking such steps will be either obligatory, supererogatory, or, at worst, merely permissible. That certain steps of this kind might turn out to be morally *im*permissible does not seem previously to have been considered.

My argument appeals to a phenomenon first described by myself elsewhere (2019), in which altruistic behavior prevents the agents who engage in it from receiving what they deserve. Insofar as desert is morally important, altruistic

behavior is therefore morally undesirable; and, if it is undesirable enough, it can be made all-things-considered morally impermissible. In my previous treatment, I struggled to present a convincing real-world example in which this phenomenon makes a moral difference. I now believe that pledges to avoid flying represent such an example. A secondary concern of the present paper, therefore, will be to rectify a defect in this earlier discussion – to present a realistic (and, I will argue, *actual*) application of the moral phenomenon in question, thus properly introducing it to the literature on applied ethics.

In the second section, I provide background on the situation surrounding jet travel and greenhouse gas emissions. In the third section, I describe the framework imported from my earlier paper, which is supposed to show that considerations of desert can provide a *pro tanto* moral reason *against* altruistic behavior. In the fourth section, I apply this framework to the moral problem presented by flight, and argue that for many real-world agents, this *pro tanto* reason is strong enough to make it all-things-considered morally impermissible to give up flying in an effort to mitigate climate change. In the final section, I address some outstanding questions, including the extent to which this argument can be extended to other actions aimed at reducing individual greenhouse gas emissions.

Greenhouse Gases and the "Travel Pledge"

First it will be helpful to define the specific type of action which is of primary interest in this paper. Let us say that an agent **commits to a travel pledge** when she decides not to fly for the rest of her life, except in cases of emergency.

Some unpacking is in order. Note that the specific action of interest here – the "commitment" itself – is a *decision* with lifelong ramifications. I assume that a decision is a type of action, and I further assume that the agents whom we are interested in will keep to their decisions. So for our purposes, an agent who commits to a travel pledge can be expected to actually fulfill this pledge, by avoiding flying in the future. (Insofar as some agents make the decision to avoid flying and then renege on it, the following discussion simply won't apply to them.)

That the decision is a *commitment* to a sustained, future course of action is significant for our purposes. For now, this should simply be borne in mind – we are talking about the deontic status of committing to a pledge, rather than, for instance, the deontic status of deciding not to fly on a particular occasion or set of occasions. I will revisit this distinction, and explore its significance, in the final section.

Finally, the "cases of emergency" which can override the pledge are not intended to be particularly permissive; I imagine emergencies to include such objectives as a visit to dying family member or the undertaking of a life-saving medical procedure only available abroad, but to exclude such objectives as the realization of an important career opportunity or of a lifelong desire to travel. For simplicity, we can omit emergency cases from the following discussion, and instead refer to the travel pledge as a commitment not to fly, without qualification.

Are there any people in the real world who commit to travel pledges? It seems that the answer is "yes", although it is difficult to determine exactly how widespread the practice is. More significant for our purposes than the actual prevalence of these pledges is the fact that a number of organizations have argued and continue to argue that we *should* commit to them. Their arguments are serious and worthy of consideration by conscientious agents. And they have attracted significant media

attention,[2] suggesting that such pledges are, and will continue to be, a major component of the public debate surrounding climate change and the responsibility of individuals to mitigate it.

For instance, "We Stay on the Ground", an organization based in Sweden, is adamant on its website that individuals ought to give up flying *entirely*, rather than merely reduce it.[3] The website for "Flight Free USA" invites visitors to commit to avoiding flying "during the climate emergency"[4] – which, presumably, will amount to a lifelong commitment.

Both organizations also invite members of the public to take less dramatic actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – such as committing to avoid flying for a year – if they feel unable to make this commitment for life. As noted before, these less dramatic measures are not the primary focus of this paper, and will be discussed only in the final section. Since both organizations advocate committing to a lifelong travel pledge as the best option – and since the arguments for doing so are serious, and apparently convincing to a growing number of agents – it seems legitimate for us to focus on this more radical proposal here.

What are the arguments in favor of committing to a travel pledge? The emphasis in public discussions seems to be placed largely on empirical claims related to flight's environmental effects – flying releases much greater quantities of greenhouse gas, per individual, than alternative forms of transportation. And, of course, since greenhouse gases contribute to climate change, and climate change is highly morally undesirable, it is supposed to follow that flying contributes to a morally undesirable situation. That seems to leave us with at least a *prima facie* moral reason not to fly.

Note that I have not presented this as an argument that it is morally *obligatory* to commit to a travel pledge; nor do activists generally seem to present it in this way. Rather, at least in non-philosophical discussions aimed at the public, the idea is to present an argument "in favor" of committing to such a pledge which is open-ended – depending on our background theories and on how the additional details get filled in, it might turn out that committing to a pledge is either obligatory or supererogatory, or that *failing* to commit to a pledge is suberogatory.

My aim in this paper, of course, is to argue for a drastically conflicting claim – that in fact, for many agents, it is morally *impermissible* to commit to a travel pledge. To present this argument, it will first be necessary to discuss my earlier (2019) claims about the relationship between altruism and desert.

Altruism and Desert

I think it is helpful to break the philosophical payload of my earlier paper into the following three components. The first is a phenomenon of interest, the second is a moral implication which I take to follow necessarily from this phenomenon, and the third is a further moral implication which I take to follow from the phenomenon in conjunction with certain contingent facts.

Here is the **phenomenon of interest (POI)**:

> Agents who act altruistically deserve to have their lives go better. But an agent who acts altruistically actually makes her life go worse, rather than better. She therefore prevents herself from receiving what she deserves.

The following discussion will be simpler if we assume that an altruistic action always entails a sacrifice, and furthermore that an altruistic action is always an expression of moral virtue. We can make these assumptions at no cost simply by

defining "altruism" in a certain way, stipulating that an altruistic action necessarily involves a net reduction in well-being on the part of the agent performing it, and that it is necessarily the expression of moral virtue. All this does is to restrict the scope of the discussion to behaviors that satisfy these conditions; it does not deny the existence of non-altruistic helping behaviors, which might either fail to reduce the agent's well-being or fail to display virtue, but simply places them outside the scope of the discussion.

For our purposes, it is not necessary to suppose that this phenomenon *always* occurs when an agent acts altruistically; it is enough if it *often* or *typically* occurs when an agent acts altruistically. (Actually, all we really need is for it to be the case that this occurs at least *sometimes,* so long as it occurs specifically in cases of commitment to a travel pledge.) So we can, for instance, allow that in some unusual cases, an agent actually *causes* herself to receive her deserts when she acts altruistically, because her life is already much better than what she deserves.

Here is the **necessary moral implication (NMI)**:

> An altruistic action is morally undesirable insofar as it prevents the agent from receiving what she deserves, and agents therefore have a *pro tanto* moral reason not to act altruistically.

In my earlier paper, I assumed the truth of a pluralistic, consequentialist normative theory in order to make this implication follow more easily. But it is not necessary for us to make such a strong assumption here – all we really need is for it to be the case that desert is morally important, and that the failure of agents to receive what they deserve is morally bad. So long as the correct normative theory allows that the goodness or badness of states of affairs can provide moral reasons, it should follow that considerations of desert can provide moral reasons. That the normative theory be purely consequentialist in structure is not required.

We must also assume that considerations of an agent's *own* desert can provide moral reasons for *her*. But in my earlier paper, I offered an argument in favor of this assumption which still seems to me convincing – if desert is truly morally important, then an agent cannot "waive" its moral significance in her own case, as is demonstrated by the fact that a bad agent cannot waive her "entitlement" to punishment.[5]

Here, finally, is the **contingent moral implication (CMI)**:

> In some cases, an altruistic action is made all-things-considered morally impermissible by its undesirable effects on the agent's own desert.

CMI effectively states that in some cases, the *pro tanto* moral reasons against acting altruistically can be decisive in determining what we morally ought to do. That this *could* occur seems to require little by way of controversial assumptions; in fact, it seems to follow from the definition of a *pro tanto* reason that such a reason can, under the right circumstances, be decisive.

A central, remaining question, however, is whether the "right circumstances" ever actually obtain in the real world. Consider the conditions that would need to be satisfied in order for the *pro tanto* moral reasons against altruism to be decisive in a particular case. My view entails that there are three.

The first two conditions, jointly, are intended to ensure that the *pro tanto* moral reasons *against* acting altruistically in a given case are reasonably strong.

> *Criterion 1: The sacrifice must be significant, meaning that the agent must make herself significantly worse-off when she acts altruistically*.

The dividing line between significant and non-significant sacrifices can remain somewhat indistinct, so long as we have an intuitive sense of the distinction and can identify sacrifices which clearly fall into one category or the other. Scratching my finger, or waking up early on one particular morning, would be an insignificant sacrifice. Losing my legs, giving up on my chosen career, or abandoning one of my life's great passions would be a significant sacrifice.

Criterion 2: The sacrifice must represent a significant exercise of virtue.

We can remain neutral on precisely which attitudes are virtuous, so long as we retain the intuitive sense that certain attitudes – such as a concern for the welfare of other human beings – qualify. And as before, we do not need to know precisely where the dividing line is between a significant and non-significant exercise of virtue, so long as we can clearly identify some exercises as significant – an agent who makes a significant sacrifice out of his concern for other humans would, for instance, satisfy this condition.

If both of these conditions are satisfied, then the agent in question can be expected to *dramatically* frustrate her own desert when she acts altruistically. The fact that she exercises *significant* virtue in acting means that she deserves for her life to be *much better* – assuming, as we have been, that this is a typical agent whose life is not already much better than the life she deserves. And the fact that she makes a significant sacrifice means that her life is actually made *much worse*. So her altruistic action results in a large mismatch between what she deserves and what she actually receives, which, presumably, entails that the *pro tanto* moral reason against acting in this way is relatively strong.

Now consider the third condition:

Criterion 3: The pro tanto *moral reasons in favor of the altruistic sacrifice in question must be either weak or non-existent.*

Altruistic actions are intended to help others, and in many cases, the benefits to these other parties are so morally important that they seem likely to outweigh any countervailing *pro tanto* reasons related to desert. So if we are looking for cases in which considerations of desert might be decisive, we should limit ourselves to cases in which there *are* no benefits to the parties that the altruistic action is supposed to help, or in which these benefits are minimal. Furthermore – since in the context of the present paper we have not committed ourselves to the truth of consequentialism – we should also exclude cases in which there are non-consequentialist considerations which might provide strong *pro tanto* moral reasons in favor of acting altruistically.

In my earlier paper, I offered two concrete examples of cases which are supposed to satisfy these three criteria and in which the *pro tanto* moral reasons related to desert are supposed to be decisive. Both are cases not of *individual* altruistic action, but of public policy decisions that have the potential to *promote* altruistic behavior among large numbers of agents. The first case – not intended to be realistic and presented for illustrative purposes – is one in which an identical amount of money can be raised for poverty relief either by encouraging large, voluntary donations from individuals, or by imposing an involuntary tax.[6]

Setting aside for now the question of whether the coercion involved in an involuntary tax is morally significant, the option which imposes the tax is supposed to be morally preferable. This is because the option which involves voluntary donations has an undesirable effect on desert – agents who voluntarily donate make themselves significantly worse off while exercising significant virtue, thus

frustrating their own desert. Note that because promoting altruism raises the same amount of money as imposing the tax – and because we have excluded the moral effects of coercion from consideration – there are no moral reasons in its favor *relative to* imposing the tax. For that reason, I consider it to satisfy the third criterion.

Why, in my previous treatment, did I focus on cases of promoting altruism in others, rather than of individual altruistic behavior? One reason is that these make it relatively easy for the third criterion to be satisfied; it is straightforward, at least in principle, to construct cases in which the same public policy goal can be attained either through altruistic or non-altruistic means.

Another reason is that I was concerned with avoiding a technical problem which arises within a particular theoretical framework concerning virtue and desert, borrowed from Thomas Hurka (2001). Within this framework, virtue – either its exercise or its existence – has positive moral value, which offsets at least partly the negative moral value associated with frustrated desert. Since promoting altruism also promotes the exercise and existence of virtue, my concern was that in many cases, this desirable effect would outweigh the undesirable effect on desert. To avoid this problem, I limited my discussion to cases in which *many* agents are moved to act altruistically. In these cases, the *distribution* of desert changes across society; this is supposed to represent an additional, morally undesirable effect which is disproportionate to any corresponding positive effects on virtue.[7] In the present paper, we are not committed to the claim that virtue is intrinsically valuable and are not required to accept the framework borrowed from Hurka, so I do not think that we need to be worried about this particular issue.[8]

Recognizing the motivations at work, however, goes some distance to explaining why the concrete illustrations which I previously offered are so convoluted and, I now think, unsatisfying. The second such illustration – which I *did* present as realistic – relates to the legalization of markets for human organs such as kidneys. My suggestion was that, *when* enough other moral considerations are either set aside or stipulated to be equal – more on this qualification shortly – the effects on desert make it preferable to legalize organ markets. Insofar as the need for organs is met by voluntary donations, this represents a significant exercise of virtue, and it dramatically prevents the donors from receiving what they deserve.[9]

Structurally, this example succeeds as an illustration of how the phenomenon is supposed to work, and of how it could, in a properly constructed case, make a difference to what we all-things-considered morally ought to do. But as a foray into applied ethics, I now think that it is seriously deficient. We saw the first hints of trouble in the first example – it seems to many of us that coercion is morally significant, but we are required to set this aside in order for the case to work. In the case of organ markets, the assumptions, and the considerations to be set aside, are multiplied. We need to assume that inducing others to sell their organs is not exploitative (or that this exploitation is not morally significant). We need to assume that an agent who voluntarily gives up an organ makes his life significantly worse by doing so (since, otherwise, it would not be a significant sacrifice). We need to assume that an impoverished person who sells an organ does not incur a greater reduction in well-being than does the voluntary donor (since, if he did, this would be a major source of moral badness, and would threaten to outweigh any considerations related to desert). We need to assume that, somehow, the exact same number of organs are made available for transplant in a market as opposed to a

non-market regime (since, again, any difference here would be likely to outweigh the significance of the effects on desert).

But I now think that there is a much more convincing real-world application of this phenomenon, and one which does not require us to make such questionable assumptions. As I will argue in the next section, for many real-world agents, it is morally impermissible to commit to a travel pledge, because to do so would prevent them from receiving what they deserve.

Travel Pledges and Desert

My strategy in this section will be to argue that there are many cases in which an agent's commitment to a travel pledge satisfies the three criteria described in the previous section. We may start with the first:

> *Criterion 1: The sacrifice must be significant, meaning that the agent must make herself significantly worse-off when she acts altruistically.*

Is there reason to think that many agents make themselves significantly worse off when they give up flying for life? I think that the answer is "yes", and I appeal here to Timmer and van der Deijl's (2023) discussion of the prudential benefits of leisure travel. Their concern is to argue that these prudential benefits are significant enough that they can sometimes make it *permissible not* to commit to a travel pledge; in so doing, they make a strong case for the claim that flying can contribute significantly to a person's well-being.

An important part of their argument is the observation that we can, to a significant extent, remain neutral on which theory of well-being is correct. Traditionally, the existing theories are divided into three categories – hedonic theories, on which well-being consists in happiness, preference-satisfaction theories, on which well-being consists in having one's preferences satisfied, and objective good theories, on which well-being consists in obtaining the goods that are contained in an objectively prescribed list.

On any of these three kinds of accounts, a plausible case can be made that an agent benefits significantly from flying and is harmed significantly by giving it up. Flying can make people happy, so it has at least a *prima facie* claim to benefit agents according to a hedonic theory. Many people have strong preferences that can be satisfied by flying, so it seems to benefit them according to a preference-satisfaction theory as well. And flying internationally also seems to enable certain plausible objective goods to be obtained – it can give agents a sense of fulfillment, a variety of experiences, and an increased knowledge of the world.

Timmer and van der Deijl quite rightly point out that the extent to which any given agent benefits from flying depends on certain facts about that agent – what his preferences are, what objective goods he has already obtained, and so on. This is no obstacle for my purposes, however, since I am merely trying to show that *many* agents would make a significant sacrifice by giving up on flying. Given some reasonable assumptions about how preferences are distributed among actual agents – as well as about what things make people happy, and what objective goods people still need to obtain – this more modest claim does seem to follow.

Now consider the second criterion:

> *Criterion 2: The sacrifice must represent a significant exercise of virtue.*

Is there a reason to think that, in many cases, an agent who commits to a travel pledge exercises significant virtue in doing so? Once again, I think that the answer

is "yes", and that we can afford to be fairly theory-neutral here – there are many plausible accounts of what virtue consists in, but regardless of which one is correct, it seems that many agents who commit to a travel pledge will exercise significant virtue.

For instance, an agent who commits to a pledge is probably displaying significant concern for the concrete considerations that are actually morally important, such as the well-being of those people who are affected by climate change.[10] An agent who commits to a pledge probably also displays significant strength of will in performing a difficult action which he *believes* to be morally right.[11] And such an agent displays a disposition to make sacrifices to help others, a trait which under normal circumstances can be expected to have very desirable consequences.[12]

Now consider the final criterion.

Criterion 3: The pro tanto *moral reasons in favor of the altruistic sacrifice in question must be either weak or non-existent.*

Is there reason to think that the *pro tanto* moral reasons in favor of committing to a travel pledge are either weak or non-existent? Here I think the answer is again "yes", but I recognize that in this case, my answer is likely to be highly controversial. There is already a large philosophical literature on the reasons in favor of taking actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and I will not attempt to survey this literature here. Instead, I will focus on summarizing one line of argument which is present in this literature and which I consider to be compelling. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) and Ewan Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong (2018) argue that it is not always obligatory for us to take steps to reduce our individual greenhouse gas emissions. I think that their argument succeeds, and that it generalizes in such a way as to show that there are no strong *pro tanto* moral reasons in favor of committing to a travel pledge.

Both of these papers focus on the example of "joyguzzling" – driving a gas-guzzling car for fun, on one particular occasion – which can be taken as a stand-in for a range of other behaviors that produce greenhouse gases. And central to both papers is the claim that these behaviors *neither cause significant harm, nor risk doing so*.

This claim is initially surprising, of course, because the authors agree with the standard, scientific consensus on climate change, according to which this phenomenon is caused by human greenhouse gas emissions and can be expected to have morally catastrophic effects. One might think that, by default, any behavior which *contributes* to such a phenomenon also contributes to its effects, and should therefore be understood as causing significant harm.

But as Sinnott-Armstrong points out, we should be careful not to confuse *emitting greenhouse gases* with *contributing to climate change*. An action only counts as contributing to climate change, in the relevant sense, if it makes climate change morally worse than it would otherwise have been – if, in other words, it makes it the case that "more people (and animals) are hurt or… hurt worse".[13] Climate change is a moral catastrophe, but only insofar as it harms many particular individuals. And "global warming and climate change occur on such a massive scale that my individual driving makes no difference to the welfare of anyone".[14]

The key claim here is that the gases which *I* emit are not going to affect climate change in such a way that it leads to morally worse outcomes – it won't, for instance, be the case that any person dies in a flood who *would not have died* if I had driven a more fuel-efficient car. Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong head off a possible

objection – that individual emissions might nevertheless carry a small *risk* of making such a difference – by pointing out that an individual's greenhouse gas emissions are not only very small, but also inevitably accompanied by similar and ongoing greenhouse gas emissions from other people. So if I refrain from emitting greenhouse gases on a particular occasion, it is not as though the total concentration of greenhouse gases will be lower as the result of my decision; instead, it is merely that greenhouse gas concentrations increase *a fraction of a second more slowly* than would otherwise be the case, since the emissions of other people cause the total concentration to rise continuously. Thus, the worst risk associated with my own emissions is that some morally undesirable outcome, like a death, will occur a fraction of a second earlier than would otherwise have been the case. This slight "hastening" of a bad outcome is in itself not supposed to be a significant harm.[15]

Having argued that individual greenhouse gas emissions do not cause or risk causing significant harm, Sinnott-Armstrong and Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong consider a number of putative grounds on which we might be obligated to avoid such emissions, and argue that all of them fail. Some of these fail precisely *because* they are dependent on the assumption that individual greenhouse gas emissions cause or risk causing harm. One suggestion, for instance, is that an agent expresses a vicious attitude when he emits greenhouse gases unnecessarily, and that it is this vicious attitude which makes the action wrong. But, as Sinnott-Armstrong points out, it is hard to see how there could be anything vicious about the agent's desire to have fun by joyguzzling, *unless* joyguzzling causes or risks causing harm in some way – which, he has argued, it does not.[16]

I find these arguments convincing. Obviously, however, they are controversial, and I cannot here devote the space that would be necessary to an adequate defense.[17] So in what follows, I invite readers to assume with me that Sinnott-Armstrong's and Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong's arguments succeed – at least in showing that we have no *pro tanto* moral reasons against joyguzzling that would be strong enough to make it impermissible. The question which remains for us is the extent to which these arguments generalize to other ways of producing individual emissions. One might object that a lifetime of flying produces more greenhouse gases than does driving a car on a single occasion. And if the difference is large enough, it might turn out that committing to a travel pledge *does* make a significant enough difference to prevent harm to particular individuals.

To a certain extent I think that this objection is a reasonable one, while to a certain extent I also think that it misses one of the key points which Sinnott-Armstrong and Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong are trying to make. Let me explain. First, I agree that the central premise of this objection is *true* – that there is *some* level of carbon such that, were you individually to emit that level, you would harm or risk harming some particular individual. In that sense, the objection is reasonable; it is proper to acknowledge that there is some threshold above which individual emissions become impermissible.

But this objection misses the point, I think, insofar as it implicitly asks us to *quantify* that level. A major conclusion of Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong's paper is that straightforward methods of calculating individual contributions to climate harm, such as John Nolt's (2011) method of "simple division", are not effective, since the harm which an agent causes is not proportional to the quantity of gases which she emits.[18] An agent who emits two tons of carbon does not cause twice as much harm as an agent who emits one ton of carbon – on Kingston and Sinnott-

Armstrong's view, the amount of harm caused by each agent would be zero, since neither one ton nor two tons is sufficient to make a difference to any individual.

Once we have rejected the straightforward methods of calculating individual harm, there is no obvious alternative. So – although Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong do not make this point explicitly – I take it that a major implication of their view is that calculating the harm threshold for emissions is basically intractable.[19] We, situated as we are, cannot calculate a level of greenhouse gases such that we can confidently assert that to emit more than this level does (or risks) causing harm, while to emit less than this level does not.

Where does this leave us? How can we determine when an action is morally forbidden due to its effects on climate change? We cannot entirely sidestep this question, because – in the objection here under discussion – it has been pointed out that a lifetime of flying emits significantly more carbon than does a single instance of joyguzzling. We need to know if this amount of carbon is enough to cause or risk causing harm.

The answer, I think, is that the best we can do in these kinds of cases is to rely on common sense – which, I think, will often turn out to be good enough. To build on an example from Sinnott-Armstrong,[20] it seems obvious that I do not cause a flood, or make the flood any worse, by pouring a single quart of water into the river upstream. There must be *some* amount of water such that, if I added that amount to the river, I *would* make the flood worse. But is there any way for us to calculate what this amount is? Perhaps, or perhaps not, but fortunately, it isn't normally necessary for us to do so. Common sense is good enough. Destroying a dam upstream would presumably be enough to make the flood worse. But we all know that dumping two quarts instead of one, or even dumping 100 quarts, would not.

So, my answer to this objection is that common sense tells us that a lifetime of flying is closer to dumping 100 quarts into the river than it is to destroying a dam. An individual's emissions from flying are not enough – in light of the enormous scale of climate change – to make the problem any worse. I do not mean to imply that the appeal to common sense is in any way infallible – certainly we would be entitled to abandon it in light of a principled reason to think that the emissions from a lifetime of flying *are* large enough to make a difference. But the burden of presenting that principled reason here lies with the objector.

A final point: One might suggest that there is a kind of "cautionary principle" which we should observe in cases of this sort. When there is some harm threshold which we know to exist but cannot confidently locate, perhaps we should err on the side of caution by assuming all relevant actions to exceed the harm threshold. So we ought, for instance, to assume that the emissions from flying are great enough to cause harm, in the absence of decisive evidence to the contrary. This might seem to be a good strategy if we want to avoid performing wrong actions. However, one implication of my argument in this paper is that it is *not*, in fact, a good strategy! We cannot "play it safe" by committing to a travel pledge, because, as I have argued, these pledges are *not* morally "safe" – for most agents, there is a strong *pro tanto* moral reason *against* committing to such a pledge. And if the reasons in favor of committing to a pledge are negligible or non-existent – as I have argued here that they are – then making such a commitment is all-things-considered morally wrong.

Questions, Answers, and Applications

I will present the final section as a series of questions and answers.

> *Question 1: Does this conclusion imply that the people who make travel pledges are not genuinely virtuous, or that they ought to be condemned?*

No, it does not. In fact, it presupposes the opposite – my argument works only on the assumption that these agents genuinely exercise significant virtue when they decide not to travel. (Remember that the argument does not apply to agents who are merely "virtue signaling" or otherwise acting in a way that does not display genuine virtue, since such agents do not prevent themselves from receiving what they deserve.) Genuinely virtuous agents who commit to travel pledges can be legitimately "condemned" only in the sense and to the extent that we can "condemn" anyone who does something impermissible; certainly they cannot be condemned in the distinctive way in which we condemn agents who act viciously, or who are blameworthy for their actions.

> *Question 2: Does this conclusion imply that organizations morally ought not to be encouraging members of the public to commit to travel pledges?*

The answer here is a bit more complicated. I *do* think that we have a *pro tanto* moral reason not to induce others to do things which are morally impermissible, so organizations, insofar as they are agents, do have such a reason not to encourage people to make travel pledges. However, it is also the case that institutions, by encouraging *many* agents to commit to a travel pledge, can have much more beneficial effects than individuals.

Crucial to my argument in the previous section was the claim that in the case of an individual, the *pro tanto* moral reasons in favor of committing to a travel pledge are negligible or non-existent; this, in turn, is dependent upon the claim that an individual does not prevent harm, or avoid the risk of causing harm, when he commits to such a pledge. But the situation facing an organization might be quite different. Recall from the final part of the previous section that there is certainly *some* quantity of greenhouse gases such that producing that quantity causes harm, and preventing that quantity from being produced prevents harm. As I explained, I am pessimistic about our ability to determine precisely what that quantity is, and I appealed to common sense to justify the claim that a single person's emissions from flying are not large enough to make a difference. But at some point, as we continue to increase the greenhouse gases which are emitted, common sense ceases to give us clear answers. What about the quantity of gases produced by one thousand people flying over the course of a lifetime? Ten thousand people? One million?

I do not claim to know what the threshold is, but I do think it is plausible that some organizations, by working to convince many people to avoid flying, could have effects on greenhouse gases that exceed this threshold. In so doing, these organizations would prevent harm. The harm which would be prevented might be significant enough to outweigh any undesirable effects on desert. And so, it might well be the case that these organizations are *obligated* to continue their work in encouraging members of the public to commit to travel pledges.

> *Question 3: Does this imply that it might be obligatory for us to* promote *an action which is individually impermissible to* perform*? Isn't that absurd?*

It does imply this, although for my part I think that there are far stranger things in the moral universe, and I'd prefer to call the implication an interesting discovery rather than an absurdity.

But suppose that I'm wrong about this, and that the implication *is* absurd, in the sense that it must be a *reductio* for one of the claims that produced it. Where should we look for the faulty claim? My suspicion is that the fault would have to lie not with any of the particular claims about desert defended in the present paper or in my previous one, but rather in the claim imported from Sinnott-Armstrong and Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong in the previous section: the claim that, if my individual contributions to climate change are too small to make a concrete difference to anyone's welfare, then it is not impermissible for me to make these contributions.

If their argument succeeds – quite irrespective of any claims about desert – then they have already shown that it is possible for there to be a difference in deontic status between the individual performance of an action and the promotion of that same action among others. It might be the case that it is collectively obligatory for us to promote a set of greenhouse gas mitigation measures (because, taken together, everyone's behaviors do make a difference to someone's welfare), but individually *not* obligatory to implement any of these measures (since no individual's contributions are large enough to make a difference to anyone's welfare).

The arguments in the present paper have only served to make this implication slightly more dramatic – I have shown that an action which it is obligatory for us to promote can nevertheless be *impermissible* for individuals to perform. Again, I don't consider this implication to be absurd. But if it *is* absurd, it is, I hope, at least a *fruitful* absurdity – it is one which forces us to reexamine some existing, plausible claims about the relationship between obligations and the effects of our actions on others, rather than one which merely affects the present paper.

> *Question 4: Is it morally impermissible to take other actions aimed at reducing individual greenhouse gas emissions? For that matter, what about committing to a "short" travel pledge – deciding not to fly for a year's time, or otherwise deciding to reduce one's flights without giving them up entirely?*

These questions are very important for understanding the implications of my conclusion. The answer is "no" – there is no reason to think that it is morally impermissible in general to take steps to reduce our emissions. And, crucially, there is no reason to think that "short" travel pledges are impermissible.

Committing to a "full" travel pledge has some unusual features, and these features are necessary in order for my argument to work. A crucial point here is that there is likely to be a significant qualitative difference between *reducing* international travel and *giving up* on international travel *entirely*. Following Timmer and van der Deijl once again, there is strong reason to think that travel, like many other goods, follows the pattern of diminishing marginal utility. The better-traveled an agent, the less well-being there is to be gained from each additional trip – regardless of whether we think well-being consists in happiness, satisfied preferences, or objective goods.

The general principle in the background here is that a sacrifice needs to be significant in order for my argument to imply that it is impermissible. Committing to a "full" travel pledge is unusual insofar as it *does* seem to represent a significant sacrifice for many agents. It is *not* necessarily the *only* greenhouse gas mitigation measure which has this feature. For instance, an agent who commits to giving up

on industrial society entirely, and to living without electricity, running water, and so forth, probably reduces his well-being in ways which are sufficiently significant; therefore, my argument may imply that it is morally wrong for agents to make such commitments.

In considering any given mitigation measure, we ought to look for the presence of a significant reduction in well-being; and, if that significant reduction is absent, we ought to conclude that the measure is (at least) permissible for agents to take. I cannot canvass all possible mitigation measures here, but it seems clear that many of them do not involve making a major sacrifice and therefore cannot be expected to significantly frustrate the desert of the agents who perform them. So it would be a mistake to infer that, for instance, it is morally impermissible to use reusable shopping bags, to refrain from joyguzzling, or even to make much more significant lifestyle changes, with an aim towards mitigating climate change.

Question 5: Does it make a difference that the moral question in this paper primarily affects those who are very affluent on a global scale?

Short answer: Maybe, but probably not. First, let me elaborate on what I take the worry here to be. I have talked in this paper about very virtuous agents who make significant sacrifices as the result of their virtue, and I have claimed that many such agents prevent themselves from receiving what they deserve. The qualifier "many" is essential here, since I do not intend to rule out the possibility of agents who do not fit this pattern. As noted earlier, it could turn out that a particular agent already has a life much better than that which she deserves; this agent would actually bring herself *closer* to what she deserves when she makes a sacrifice, rather than preventing herself from receiving it.

My assumption so far has been that such agents would be the exception rather than the rule. But one might object that we have reason to think otherwise. The agents who commit to travel pledges, are, presumably, very affluent on a global scale – they must be, in order to have the opportunity to fly in the first place. Perhaps the average agent in the developed world is *so* affluent that his life is already better than what he deserves; if so, he does not prevent himself from receiving his desert when he commits to a travel pledge.[21]

My response will be a quick one. Although I am not prepared to argue directly against the claim that most agents in the developed world have better lives than they deserve, I do want to point out that much of our existing moral behavior *presupposes* that this claim is false – or, at least, that it makes no moral difference.

In point of fact, we *do* care about what agents in the developed world deserve *relative to one another*, and the fact that all agents in the developed world are relatively affluent by global standards does not seem to make much difference. For instance, suppose that some agent in the developed world is accused of committing a crime, and that we want to determine whether or not he deserves to be punished. It would *not* be a very convincing argument in favor of punishment to say that, since the agent is very wealthy by global standards, he already has a better life than that which he deserves, and should therefore have his well-being reduced, *regardless* of whether he is guilty or innocent.

This seems to show that we are committed to one of the following two claims: *either* agents in the developed world do *not*, in general, already have lives that are better than they deserve, *or,* for the purposes of making moral decisions related to desert, it is acceptable to treat the agents in the developed world as a single population – that is, to make desert comparisons between relatively affluent agents,

without comparing them against agents from less-affluent communities. Of course, we might in the end reject both of these claims. But in that case, we would need to reconsider our practices surrounding desert as a whole, and we would have much more serious problems to worry about than the permissibility of travel pledges.

Notes

[1] One notable exception, Timmer and van der Deijl (2023), is to be discussed below.
[2] See, e.g. Kamin (2023).
[3] See <https://westayontheground.org/questions-and-answers/>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
[4] See <https://flightfree.org/>. Accessed 9 April 2024.
[5] 2019, p.315.
[6] 2019, p.311.
[7] 2019, pp.318-22.
[8] There is no space to discuss this at greater length in the present paper. But one reason that I am no longer worried about this problem is that I now think that a *single* agent can affect the distribution of desert by making herself worse off – and that this effect can be significant enough to be seriously morally undesirable. So I do not think we need to limit ourselves to cases of large-scale action, *even if* we accept Hurka's framework.
[9] 2019, pp.322-5.
[10] As, e.g., Arpaly (2002) and Arpaly and Schroeder (2013) consider to be sufficient for virtue.
[11] As Kant is traditionally interpreted as considering to be sufficient for virtue; see Johnson and Cureton (2022).
[12] As, e.g. Driver (2001) considers to be sufficient for virtue.
[13] 2005, p.301.
[14] 2005, p.301.
[15] 2018. pp.176-8, 180-1.
[16] 2005, p.304.
[17] Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong's (2018) is largely a defense of Sinnott-Armstrong's (2005) against various critics; see, e.g. Baatz (2014), Nolt (2011), Schwenkenbecher (2012).
[18] 2018, pp.174-5.
[19] Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong (2018) go beyond Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) in arguing that the climate effects of carbon are an *emergent* property, which seems to support this implication.
[20] 2005, pp.298-9.
[21] One might try to strengthen this objection by pointing out that the *benefits* of climate altruism tend to accrue to relatively poor agents, since they will be disproportionately affected by climate change, and argue that this gives us an additional reason to think that a travel pledge's effects on desert are positive rather than negative. But in the context of the present paper, this would be a red herring – we have already followed Sinnott-Armstrong and Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong in assuming that there *are* no benefits which result from *one* individual's giving up flying.

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